

# Re-conceptualizing Built Heritage in Saudi Arabia

Mine Elhatip





Photo of the historic AlBalad district by Mine Elhatip



Politecnico di **Torino**

Master's Degree **Thesis**

Master of Science in **Architecture for Heritage**

February Session **2025**

# Reconceptualizing Built Heritage in Saudi Arabia

Supervisor

Professor Rosa **Tamborrino**

Candidate

Mine **Elhatip**



**Politecnico  
di Torino**





**Official map of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. GEOSA. General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information, October 8, 2024.**





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor **Rosa Rita Tamborrino**  
and her supportive department members including  
Professor **Mesut Dinler**,  
PhD **Pelin Bolca**,  
PhD candidate **Sofia Darbesio**

Professor **Willeke Wendrich**,  
Professor **Hisham Mortada**,  
Professor **Fulvio Rinaudo**,  
PhD **Emine Çiğdem Asrav**  
who have generously guided me with their feedback

and of course **my parents**  
for taking me around many cultural trips around Saudi Arabia



# Abstract

# 01

## KEYWORDS

Conceptualisation of Heritage, Nation building, Destination development, Heritage management, Redefining Heritage

## 01 ABSTRACT

Heritage as a notion has recently been a shifting paradigm in Saudi Arabia. The novel tourism-oriented approach to heritage, especially built heritage, has developed unique projects that aim to diversify the country's economy and have the young population partake in the process. This research proposes the enhancement of built heritage as a key factor for the ongoing nation building programme to flourish national pride, foster a skilful generation and prosper the economy. This research analyses chosen methods of regenerating built heritage, to demonstrate how the inherent values of heritage are revived. It explores the multifaceted relationship between heritage, natural resources and the continuous development of national identity. The tribal town of AlUla, home to the first world heritage site of the kingdom, is evaluated as a national role model for a fast-paced cultural development. The methods implemented on the site are analysed through risk-benefit analysis to evaluate the model's re-implementation in other contexts. Heritagisation of the oil industry is discussed to showcase its past and future contribution towards tourism and dissemination, as well as its influence on the Saudi identity. Case studies are analysed through interviews with stakeholders, detailed site visit reports and literature reviews to create a comprehensive framework of the conceptualization of heritage in the area today.



## **01 ABSTRACT**

## **02 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.0 Introduction and Thesis Question
- 2.1 Literature Review
- 2.2 Scope and Methodology
- 2.3 Ethical Considerations

## **03 CONCEPTUALISATION OF HERITAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA**

- 3.0 History and Time-lines
- 3.1 Local Interpretation of Heritage, the Historic Approach
- 3.2 Evolution of Administrative Policies Concerning Historic Preservation
- 3.3 Key Actors Today

## **04 BUILDING A NEW IDENTITY THROUGH HERITAGE INTERPRETATION**

- 4.0 Vision 2030 and Recent Reforms
- 4.1 Comparison to Earlier European Examples
- 4.2 Role of Heritage in Nation Building
- 4.3 New Identity? Revival? Westernisation?

## **05 CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF AL ULA**

- 5.0 Tangible and Intangible Heritage
- 5.1 Administrative Changes
- 5.2 Infrastructural Development of the Site
- 5.3 Academic Interest and Collaborations

- 5.4 Destination Development
- 5.5 Model or Experiment? Existing Models

## **06 EVALUATION AS A MODEL**

- 6.0 Nation and Identity Building
- 6.1 Top-down Implementation
- 6.2 Public Participation & Remote Communities
- 6.3 Training VS Doing
- 6.4 Gender Perspective
- 6.5 Destination Development and Heritage Conservation, Can They Coexist?
- 6.6 Public Opinions
- 6.7 Solutions for Long Term Success

## **07 OIL AS HERITAGE, RESOURCE AND OPPORTUNITY**

- 7.0 Heritagization of Oil Industry
- 7.1 Shared Awareness and Departure from Oil Dependency
- 7.2 New Identity and Approach to Oil

## **08 CONCLUSION**

- 8.0 Limitations of the Research
- 8.1 Conclusion

## **09 SITOGRAPHY**

## **10 REFERENCES**

## **11 APPENDIX**



# Introduction

# 02

## 2.0 INTRODUCTION AND THESIS QUESTION

Recognition and protection of heritage is nearly never a linear process. Conflicts between collective identity and inherited architecture make heritagisation delicate and complicated. Migration, religion, evolving cultures, changing climates and simply the passage of time often leave abandoned, damaged and neglected structures.

Much like other countries, Saudi Arabia has also defined its national identity through a specific stylistic period in its history. For centuries this identity has been driven from its rich religious history. However the introduction of the Vision 2030 is introducing a new phenomenon, where **pre-Islamic** ancient sites become the leading focus in the steps forward under wielding the power of the past, or as Dinler describes it “to control the past primarily for the goal of nation-making” in his book “*Modernisation through Past*”.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the thesis is to study the making of a new national identity and to answer the question: *Is there a nation building ongoing in Saudi Arabia? Do built heritage sites play a key role in this new identity? How do the social and cultural reforms taking place, influencing the conceptualization of heritage by the people? Can we extrapolate this rapid development model, improve it and apply it in other heritage sites?*

<sup>1</sup> Dinler, Mesut. *Modernization through past: Cultural Heritage during the late-ottoman and the early-republican period in Turkey*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2019.



The site known amongst the Islamic community as the 'town cursed by the Prophet Mohammed', the Nabataean heritage site of Al-Ula is analysed to showcase the rapid change in attitude towards built heritage sites by the kingdom. This case study is chosen to highlight the authorities' selected methods in cultural and economic promotion of the site, proving their intentions to initiate a new era in Saudi built heritage. The oil heritage of Saudi Arabia is analysed to evaluate its potential to re-conceptualize a healthy relationship with the Saudi identity in the past and the future.

The thesis evaluates the ongoing cultural development efforts, and discusses whether this *model* can be compared to similar projects in the middle east and beyond, or extrapolated, improved and implemented in future ones.

## 2.1 Literature Review

Existing literature on the current decision making process around heritage in the kingdom are limited but not non-existent. The lack of publication stems from the relatively short urban history of Saudi cities, as well as the rapidly changing framework and shifting public perception surrounding heritage. The motivation behind the changing approach to heritage can be categorised under economic, social-cultural and environmental factors (political reasons are addressed but not emphasised to maintain a focus on built heritage).

AlUla is under the spotlight as Saudi Arabia's first non-Islamic built heritage site to be developed. Pavan (2023) creates an outline of the conceptual

transformation of AlUla into a global destination. While the article looks at the implementation of the model, the new dynamic between nation building and use of historic sites is essential in re-conceptualising built heritage. Balkhy's 2021 thesis analyses the tourism management practices in AlUla with regards to the satisfaction of the tourists and the opinions of the locals. A detailed analysis of factors which has previously led to loss of heritage sites is required to follow the changes of the approach, supplemented by evidence of the ongoing reforms in the country to create a continuous narrative of built heritage.

Tourism has always been a vital part of Saudi Arabia's economy despite its long history with strict regulations on non-Islamic tourism. The two most celebrated heritage sites in the kingdom: the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, hosted 1.84 million pilgrims in 2023 per official statistics. According to the Saudi Ministry of Tourism, the tourism industry has reached 4% of the total GDP with a 65% growth from 2022. As the numbers already surpassed the targets set within the vision 2030, the creation of new heritage destinations are a key part of the departure from the ending oil economy and attempts in economic diversification. Naseem, S. (2021) provides empirical evidence that tourism contributes to the country's economy in both short and long run whereas Ali, A. (2018) argues that the expenditures may surpass the revenue if the government doesn't target world class facilities. Nevertheless the general consensus is positive for tourism as potential sustainable form of income.



**Socio-cultural** changes are amongst the most evident in the recent advancements in the country; gender equality and religious conservatism being amongst the biggest concerns in heritage management. Arab News (2024) describes the 'religious morality police' as a thing of the past after the issue of a royal decree in 2016 since they are stripped of their power to question, arrest or detain someone. Abuhjeeleh, M. (2019) argues that the kingdom's increasing sensitivity to women's rights and relaxing of strict laws that were once a hindrance to the tourism industry, now optimises the country's chances in reaching their next tourism targets.

A study conducted on local women in the event and festival sector, Almathami (2020) identified "cultural values, social network, workplace environment, education and training, gender diversity and regulation" still to be the biggest challenges for female participation. According to AlGassim (2023) religiosity was actually a positive factor in determining residents' responses to the incoming tourism to the village of Al-Juhf. He identified that those who lose resources as the biggest are the most likely to not allow developments by foreign

It is difficult to find up-to-date information about the reaction and implications of the ongoing policy changes. However, it is evident that women have gained new rights (such as travel freedom without a male guardian, having a driver's license, entering stadiums, working in leadership positions etc.) in the past decade more than any other time frame in history.

Bsheer's 2017 article *Heritage as War*<sup>2</sup> creates a detailed description of the historic outlook of heritage and memorialization by the country leaders. She delineates that "the practices of memorialization counter official religious beliefs". It took the blessing of religious leaders and a multi media national campaign to reverse the public opinion. Yet any material heritage that was found outside of the country's capital (and the home of the royals) was "altogether ignored" as they did not bear witness to the heritage of the Al Saud family. Archaeological sites, (especially those found in Makkah) which could suggest the temporality of religion, were demolished with little to no media attention in 2010. Mazzetto (2023) argues that in the last decades the Saudi Commission of Tourism and National Heritage has financed many restoration works of archaeological, religious and urban areas in an attempt to promote national heritage, sustainable tourism and independency from oil. Publications concerning protection of built heritage showcases a sudden increase in since 2020 (around 20,200 results for "built heritage in Saudi Arabia").

The risk **climate change** imposes on tangible and intangible heritage is an ongoing debate. An assessment done (by Ramadan et al, 2022) using remote sensing and GIS technologies suggests that most built heritage are at moderate to low risk when analysed under temperature, humidity, and precipitation as factors within 20 years. Although Dano et. al. (2023) argues that urban fabric is prone to coastal flooding in Dammam metropolitan area, possible affecting agricultural land, landscape heritage and the rural communities. On the other hand, is apparent that the government is facing

<sup>2</sup> Rosie Bsheer, "Heritage as War," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (October 16, 2017): 729-34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002074381700068x>.



challenges aligning environmental and economic policies due to the absence of a climate action plan, the lack of quantitative data et cetera (Al Sarihi, 2019).

Overall, the existing research provides grounds for but not directly addresses the complete evolution of conceptualisation of heritage in the kingdom in relation to nation building. While the case study of AlUla has been studied in terms of its tourism development, its role in creating a new national narrative is important to discuss extensively to understand the new concept of built heritage.

## 2.2 Scope and Methodology

Saudi Arabia is a compelling case for heritage research. Its distinction from the European blueprint of cultural development, combined with the strict past administrative policies creates a unique set of challenges and therefore requires a unique approach.

The main strategy of the study is to create a qualitative in-depth analysis of the cultural heritage, with an emphasis on national identity. The speed of reforms in the kingdom are showcased through a time-line of newspaper articles to demonstrate the current winds of change from the point of a citizen.

These newspaper articles are mostly a combination of local and foreign

newspapers in English, mostly featuring articles from *Arab News* and *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*. Arab News is a Saudi Arabian daily newspaper in English founded in 1975. It has a large digital archive which was consulted for the purposes of this research. It is worth noting that many newspapers in Saudi Arabia are created by royal decree and are managed by the *Saudi Broadcasting Authority* under the *Ministry of Media*. Independent newspaper articles must be approved by the ministry under Article 18 of Law of Printing and Publication:

*"Article Eighteen:*

*External printed matters shall be approved if free from anything insulting to Islam or the system of Government or injurious to high interests of the state or scarify public morality and conflict with ethical standards."*<sup>3</sup>

Due to such laws in media protecting damage to the public image, it is unlikely to come across articles about controversial issues. Hence, articles from foreign newspapers are used in supplement.

Although not an official language, English is widely spoken in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, it is difficult painting a realistic depiction of Saudi Arabia solely based on a single media type in English; therefore, additional data collection methods, such as interviews and academic articles were used to diversify the resources as well as to obtain more in-depth information about the built heritage in the country.

<sup>3</sup> "The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia." Law of Printing and Publication | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Accessed February 5, 2025.



Interviews

#	RELEVANCE	INTERVIEW DATE	INTERVIEW FORMAT	TOPIC OF DISCUSSION
1	- Heritage expert - Decision maker	27/11/2024	- In person conversation - Semi structured interview	- Motivations behind heritage decisions, - Whether the model/ experiment is a successful role model
2	- Former resident of KSA - Site visitor		- In person conversation - Semi structured interview	Visiting experience before the site opened to the public for tourism
3	- Tour Guide 1	25/11/2024	- In person conversation	- History of Jabal Ikhmah and the timeline of excavations
4.	- Tour Guide 2	25/11/2024	- In person conversation	- Agricultural culture of Old town - Madain Saleh before RCU
5	- AlUla local	16/10/2024	- Virtual meeting - Semi structured interview	- Perception of Nabatean heritage and tourism by a local
6	Professor of Architecture	15/11/2024	- Virtual meeting - Semi structured interview	Evolution of Alula and the conceptualization of heritage in the kingdom

Table 1: List of interviews

6 semi-structured interviews were carried out through a virtual meeting or in person. Each interview varied in questions depending on why the interviewee was chosen in the first place. The name of the interviewees are not provided to remain their anonymity. See table 1 for a detailed list of the interviews.

Overall the data collection methodologies utilized in this study are:

- Semi structured interviews with 6 visitors of the site with different backgrounds
- Collection of digital newspaper articles, photographs and maps
- Academic articles, journals, books, exhibition leaflets
- Site visit, personal observations and experience and photographs

The main limitation of the study is the access to primary resources. In the realm of this research, useful primary sources would have been communications from decision makers, archives, videos and photographs of the case study built heritage sites and statistics and datasets. However the lack of systematic historical archiving and restrictions on tourism (for reasons other than pilgrimage until 2019) limit the public data available today. Although, the government has recently launched open data initiatives such, Open Data Platform SA and Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority, the access to relevant data for foreign researchers remain unavailable at the time of this study.

## 2.3 Ethical Considerations

This research has been carefully planned to recognise the values of knowledge, understanding and respect to show cultural sensitivity both in terms of the treatment of the interviewees and the topics discussed.

Some ethical considerations may rise in relation to the conduct of interviews. The interviewees were selected at a voluntary basis, after explanation of the research task including the purpose of the research, the topics that will be discussed, the time required and how the information will be handled and used. It was explained that their personal data will not be misused or made public without their explicit consent.

Some interviewees required further clarification and were provided with the full set of questions before giving their informed consent. Full transparency of the research process was essential and a double blind study was not considered as many subjects were hesitant to join without discussing the contents first.

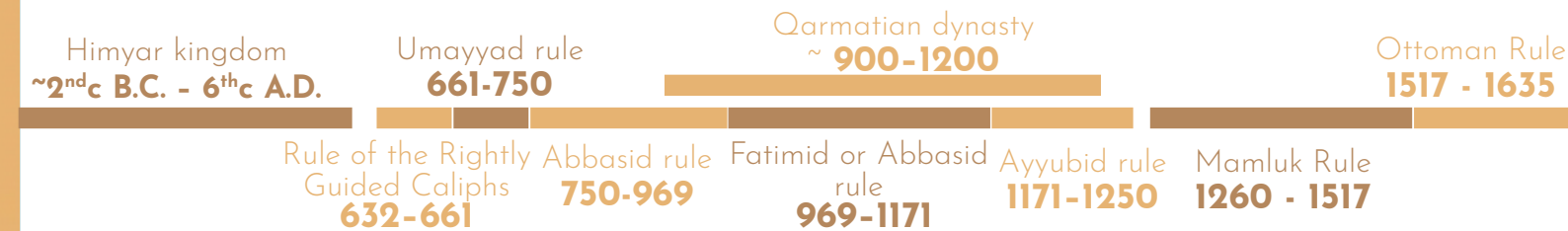
All interviewees were given the option to opt-out or skip the questions at any point without repercussions if they felt uncomfortable. Anonymity was a significant requirement for many of the interviewees. Many raised the point that they do not feel comfortable sharing their personal details to be able to provide their honest opinions.



# Conceptualisation of Heritage in Saudi Arabia

## 3.0 HISTORY AND TIME-LINES

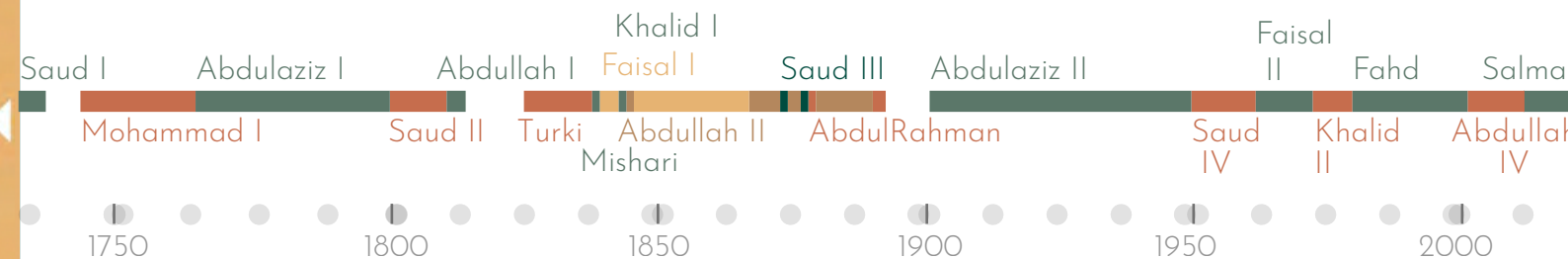
### Islamic Timeline of the Arabian Peninsula



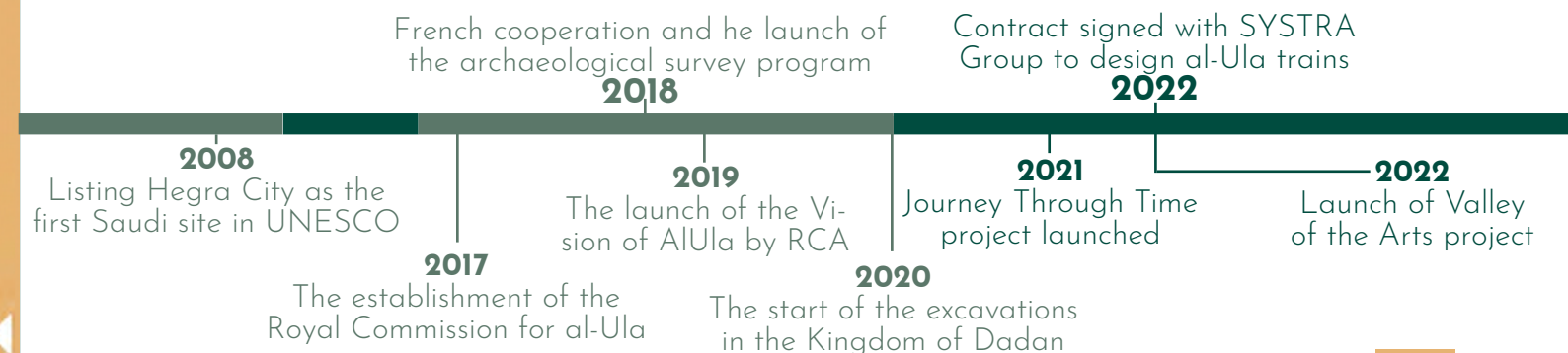
### Timeline of the Al-Ula Region



### The Chronology of the Kings of Saudi Arabia



### Post Vision 2030 Timeline of Al-Ula



03

## Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) was founded in 1932 after the unification of the tribes and independent states in the Arabian peninsula by the first King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud. The Saud tribe (from which the royal family descends from) origins date back to the 1446-47 to the Najd region.<sup>1</sup> The rocky highland plateau of this region was not of interest to many external parties unlike the Western coastal region of Hejaz. During the reign of the Caliphs and the Ottomans, the Najd region was mostly left un-administered. Similarly other dynasties such as the Umayyads, Abbasids and Fatimids have not shown interest in the area, possibly due to the lack of natural resources and extreme temperatures.<sup>2</sup>

This central region housed many different Bedouin tribes which ruled over the area in the 18th century. As one of the more powerful tribes of the region, the Saud dynasty was able to establish the settlement Diriyah (near today's capital Riyadh) through an important alliance with the Wahhabi school of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Over the next century, through many battles with Ottoman, Egyptian and Rashidi (another tribe from the Najd) forces, the Saud dynasty had found and lost their state twice. The ruling family was exiled to Kuwait in 1893, which had the advantage of being ruled by an anti Ottoman-Rashidi emir and protected by the British. Throughout the troubled beginnings of the dynasty the Saudi tribes have managed to retain the loyalty

<sup>1</sup> Stenslie, Stig. *Regime stability in Saudi Arabia the challenge of Succession*. London: Routledge, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Bowen, Wayne H. "The Creation of Saudi Arabia (1902-1932)." Essay. In *The History of Saudi Arabia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008

of many of the tribes in the Najd. In 1901 Ibn Saud had returned to Riyadh with his troops and seized the city as his capital.

The beginning of the 20th century with two more Ottoman strikes, a 3 year long drought, capturing of Ibn Saud's brother by the Ottomans and rebellious Bedouin tribes was not an easy start for the Saudi kingdom. Ibn Saud was not left with much choice but to expand his territory. The Hasa region that was controlled by the Ottomans without much infrastructure or organised infantry. Additionally, the ongoing Balkan wars and tensions with Russia and Austria in 1912-13 made the Ottomans unprepared for the Saudi assault in 1913. In May 1914 a treaty was signed between the Saudis and the Ottomans about the Saudi control of Hasa, with limited Ottoman control over foreign affairs.



Mudbrick houses of the regal citadel of the first Saudi state **Al-Turaif. DIRIYAH**. Accessed December 16, 2024.



During the first year of the first world war, the British backed Arab tribes under the guidance of Thomas Edward Lawrence (today known as the Lawrence of Arabia) revolted against the Ottomans to seize Damascus in 1918. Notably the Saudi tribes did not take part in the revolt against another Islamic state. In 1915 the Anglo-Saudi treaty established official Saudi rule in Hasa and Najd given that the Gulf states were British Protectorates.

Post-war France and Britain were dividing the middle east under Sykes-Picot, while the western and central Arabia were once again disregarded. The western Hejaz region, home to the two holy mosques and the Jeddah port were under control by Sharif Hussein, who took advantage of the secularising Turkish state to declare himself the caliph. By 1925, the Saudis had taken over the coastal region, foreign to the Wahhabi practices.

The establishment of a unified state, after centuries of Ottoman rule over the area, was only 6 years prior to the discovery of commercial amounts of oil in the Eastern city of Dammam. The discovery by the company Standard Oil of California (SOCal) and the consequent oil export escalated rapidly over the decades.<sup>3</sup> This newly found industry and its impact on the country's development, along with the built heritage that witnessed the transformation, are today categorised as industrial heritage of the nation. (UNESCO Tentative List Ref.: 6639)

<sup>3</sup> Al-Rasheed, Madawi. *A history of Saudi Arabia* (version 2005). Cambridge. Org. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

## 3.1 Local Interpretation of Heritage, the Historic Approach

### Religious Ideologies and Built Heritage

Before conceptualizing the approach to heritage, especially built heritage in the kingdom today, it is important to understand the religious and tribal ethic which influence the political history of the region.

Wahhabism, although not a direct sect of Islam, is a Sunni monotheistic movement<sup>4</sup> which aims to purify the religion. It follows the teachings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdul Wahab, and is widespread in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the ideology. The term is so commonly associated with extreme conservatism and intolerance, that as a non-derogatory alternative, the term "Salafis" is occasionally preferred.

The Wahhabi doctrine strongly addresses idolatry as a shirkh. "The Qur'an explains *"shirk or 'associating' partners to God as the ultimate doctrinal sin (Q 4:48)"*<sup>5</sup>. This concept in the 19th century was widely applied to all built heritage which displayed a potential for people to worship in anything other than God. This primarily concerned all historic Islamic sites that might mislead people to worship the prophets or their family, or even in a larger scale any objects that might be considered idols such as graves, archaeological

<sup>4</sup> Abdullah F. Alrebh, "A Wahhabi Ethic in Saudi Arabia," *Sociology of Islam* 5, no. 4 (December 5, 2017): 278-302

<sup>5</sup> Linnhoff, Josef Sebastian. "'associating' with God in Islamic Thought: A Comparative Study of Muslim Interpretations of Shirk." "Associating" with God in Islamic thought: a comparative study of Muslim interpretations of shirk, June 29, 2020

findings, statuettes, visual representations of religious figures, use of saints and devotion to earthly concepts such as business, wealth and oneself.

The strong opposition to visual and tangible heritage with the aim of preserving monotheism in the home of Islam, has separated the concept of heritage in the country from the Western models for a long time. The recent reforms in the country aim to promote the use of built heritage without disturbing the conservative *ulema*.

It is important to highlight the difference in approach by other communities. Many believe that visiting Muslim graves have been a part of Islamic tradition for centuries while the verses declaring it a shirk was descended only for the pagans.<sup>6</sup> Sufism and Shia Muslims, have a different set of beliefs from Wahhabis, and tend to regard saints, imams, caliphs and other significant individual figures highly.

Approximately 85-90% of the Saudi Arabian population is believed to be Sunni Muslims, in comparison to the 10-12% of Shia minority. More than 30% of the population is made by the multi-faith foreign workforce. Non-Muslims are not allowed in the holy site of Makkah.<sup>7</sup> Until 27 September 2019, tourism for reasons other than pilgrimage to Makkah and Medinah weren't allowed. Non-Muslim foreigners could not enter Saudi Arabia with the exception of those in possession of valid work visas.

<sup>6</sup> Sanadgol Ghalenoei, Mostafa. "A Study on the Sharp Difference between the Views of Muhammad Bin Abdulwahhab and Shia and Sunni Scholars on Visiting the Saint Graves." Seraj-e Monir, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, November 19, 2024.

## Influence of Nomadic Background

Although this thesis focuses on the relationship between people and built heritage, considering the nomadic and tribal habits is integral to understanding the evolution of built heritage conceptualization. Often the desert is disregarded as a desolate space far from built environments as we know them. The many examples of urbanisation through simplistic geometric division displays how little we know or care about the delicate lifestyle that once flourished in the desert space. The desert is an ecosystem of nomadism, sedentism and the many in-between.

Sarah Saad Alajmi's essay, "Traces of Arabia" published for the Kuwait pavilion demonstrates beautifully the culture of the *badu* and the socio-economic organisation within the desert. This ontological analysis of availability of resources, environmental factors, animal husbandry and trade routes offer a new layer of understanding towards the attitude to built heritage other than cultural and religious causes.<sup>8</sup>

Water was essential yet a scarce resource for the *Bedouin*. The scarcity of rain water pools and permanent wells forced them to always stay on the move. Domesticating camels were essential to move around the desert infrastructure. Grazing areas for the camels on pastoral landscapes were vital for the survival of the livestock. Each tribe moved differently through the seasons between high lands and valleys. Astronomy was essential as the constellations

<sup>8</sup> Alajmi, Sarah Saad. "Traces of Arabia." Essay. In *Space Wars*, 84-91. National Council for Culture, Art and Letters, State of Kuwait, 2021.



# ROUGH TRIBAL MAP OF ARABIA

Scale- 180 Miles = 1 inch

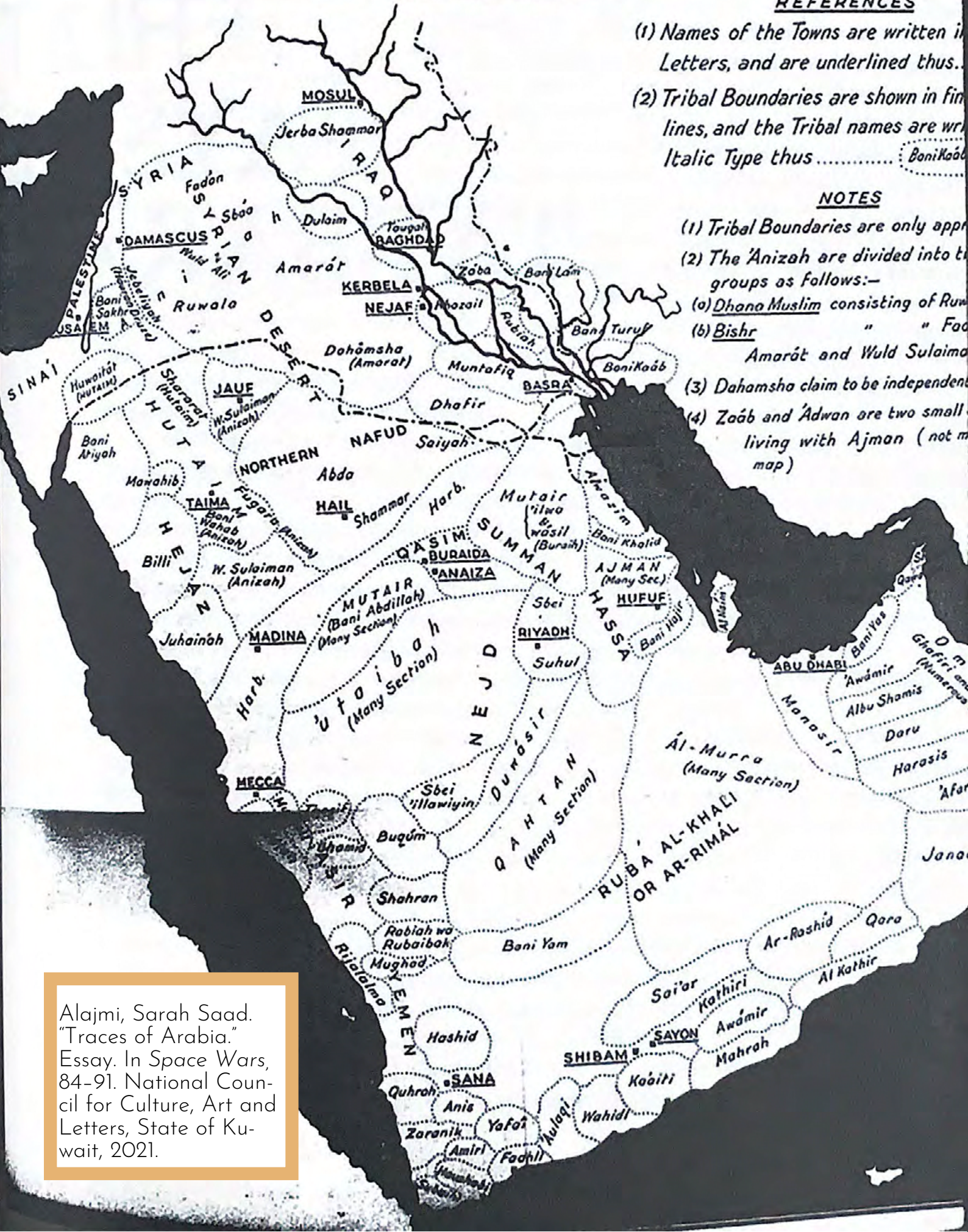
100 0 100 200 miles.

## REFERENCES

- (1) Names of the Towns are written in Letters, and are underlined thus.
- (2) Tribal Boundaries are shown in fine lines, and the Tribal names are written in Italic Type thus..... *Bani Kaab*

## NOTES

- (1) Tribal Boundaries are only approximate.
- (2) The 'Anizah are divided into the following groups as follows:-
  - (a) *Dhahna Muslim* consisting of Ruwala, Amarāt and Wuld Sulaiman
  - (b) *Bishr* " " " "
- (3) *Dahamsha* claim to be independent.
- (4) *Za'ab* and *'Adwan* are two small tribes living with *Ajman* (not on map)



Alajmi, Sarah Saad.  
"Traces of Arabia."  
Essay. In Space Wars,  
84-91. National Council  
for Culture, Art and  
Letters, State of Ku-  
wait, 2021.

were the both their maps and the calendar.

The temporality paralleled natural cycles. The set of skills developed in each journey was a reflection of the Bedouin trails. There was no single ruler, and no desire to be remembered over another dynasty.

In fact, creating a cartography of these desert spaces is just as challenging. The fixed borders drawn on traditional maps don't represent the seasonal changes, desert infrastructure, trade routes or even the inhabitant tribes. Potentially, a *Museo Diffuso* (a museum in close relationship to its territory with a strong commitment to promoting culture) established with consultative groups can collect, revive and disseminate this disappearing narrative.

It is evident that the priorities of the Bedouin did not lie within built monuments. The nomadic lifestyle left very few traces on the landscape. The aim to construct for memory or safeguarding them future generations does not appear to be common in local customs. It can be argued that the lack of significance given to built heritage in Saudi Arabia through the following decades is due to the predominance of the intangible over the tangible heritage in the area. As many of the intangible heritage including poetry and oral traditions, animal domestication, culinary practices, henna and calligraphy practices are strongly embraced by the public.

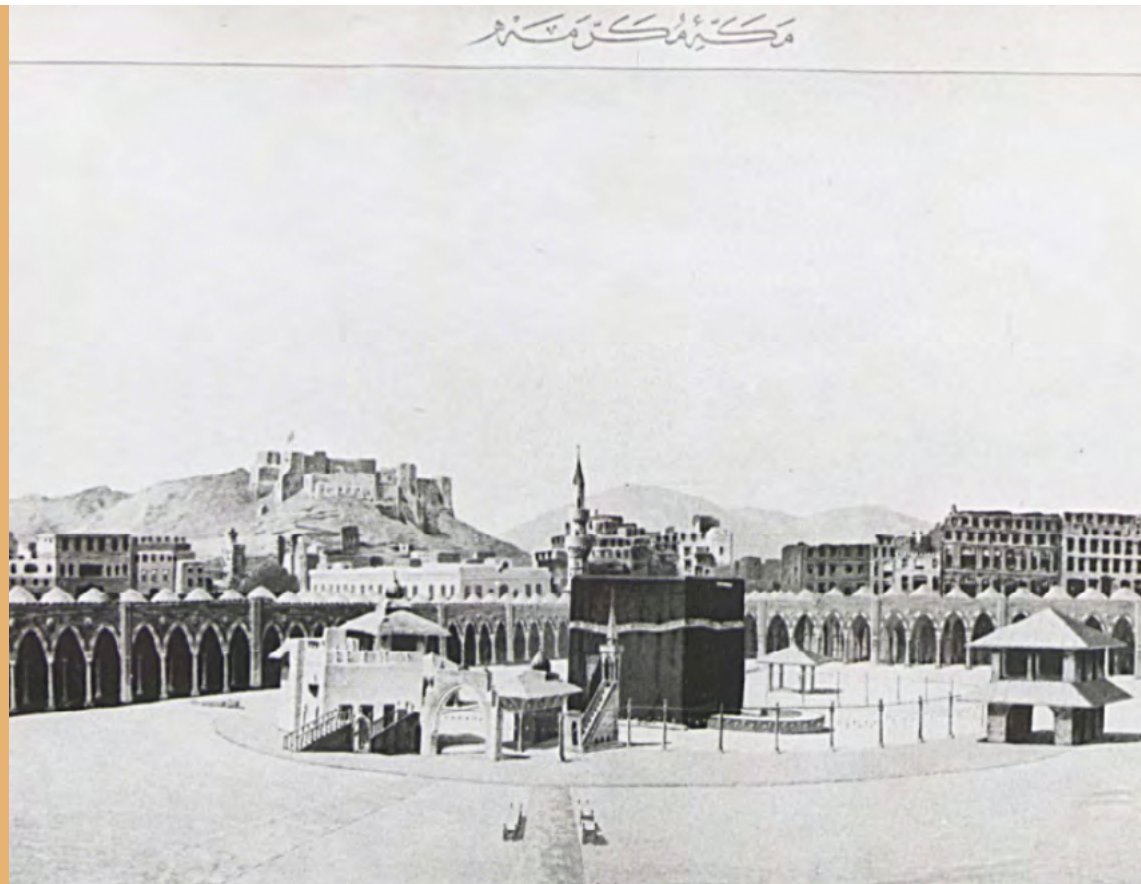


## Controversies Over Destruction of Built Heritage

For most of the 20th century, preservation of built heritage in Saudi Arabia was concerned primarily with the legacy of the royal Saud family. The selective conservation process combined with the targeted destruction of many

Photo showing  
the Ajyad for-  
tress behind  
the Kaaba

Masjid  
Al-Haram in  
Mecca.  
Photograph.  
SALT Re-  
search, n.d.  
SALT  
Research.



*"Cultural heritage can be defined not as remnants of the past, but as a 'process or a human condition' which helps a society to choose what to tell the next generations and other people, what to forget and what to remember."*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dinler, Mesut. *Building the Heritage: Politics and Historic Preservation in Turkey from the 19th Century to the 1980s*, 2018.

heritage sites paved the way for the many controversies targeting the kingdom.

The economic boom in the second half of the 20th century has caused the cities to annually grow 6.7% on average<sup>9</sup>. This great expansion, affecting mostly major cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam has created a sudden need for urban infrastructure causing unplanned urban sprawl. The sudden interest in building in concrete has caused abandonment and destruction of many vernacular neighbourhoods. This loss is mostly attributed to the lack of responsible authorities and awareness of the significance of traditional architecture at the time.

However the major controversies concerning the kingdom refer to its more recent past. Time's controversial article "Saudi Arabia Bulldozes Over Its Heritage" provides a detailed account of religious-historical sites which were purposefully damaged, transformed or demolished. Many are believed to be rebuilt into modern commercial sites to account for the millions of pilgrims and religious tourists visiting the kingdom. The article claims a 98% of the historical and religious built heritage sites were destroyed since 1985<sup>10</sup> including:

- Ottoman arched porticoes around the Great Mosque demolished for the expansion of the courtyard
- Carved marble columns dating back to the 8th century were razed
- The house of Hamza, (Prophet Muhammad's uncle) was flattened to make way for a Meccan hotel
- House of the first caliph, Abu Bakr replaced by a Hilton hotel

<sup>9</sup> Al-Hathloul, Saleh, and Muhammad Aslam Mughal. "Urban Growth Management-the Saudi Experience." *Habitat International* 28, no. 4 (December 2004): 609-23.

<sup>10</sup> Power, Carla. "Saudi Arabia Bulldozes over Its Heritage." *Time*, November 14, 2014.



- The split in Mount Uhud, where the Battle of Uhud filled with concrete
- House of the Prophet's first wife, Khadijah rebuilt into public toilets
- The mosque belonging to Islam's first caliph Abu Bakr demolished and replaced by an ATM

Muslim communities outside of Saudi Arabia have shown strong disagree-



**Abd al Ghaffar ,  
Abu Sayyid.** *Zweite  
Ansicht der Stadt  
Mekka über die nor-  
dwestliche (rechts)  
und die südwestliche  
Seite (links) der Mo-  
schee hinaus. 1889.*  
**Photograph.**



*Aerial view of Mak-  
kah's Grand Mosque  
during Ramzan  
2024. Saudi Press  
Agency, April 1,  
2024.*

ment to the Saudi government's plans to remove the remains of the Prophet Mohamed from the *al-Masjid al-Nabawi* mosque, where they are buried under the Green Dome,<sup>11</sup> as the site is highly regarded as the second most important pilgrimage site for Muslims worldwide. There are no public official records of the precise work done on these areas by the local authorities.

Sell (2024) argues that some of the demolitions were done with socio-political purposes of erasing Shia presence and Yemeni cultural identity from the middle east.

Farhat (2018) disputes the common belief that the conservative Wahabist *ulema* (Muslim scholars and guardians) had the power or the reasons to cause such destruction. The author argues that the sites were safeguarded for centuries by Muslims, and it is unreasonable to assume that Islamic sites would be the first ones to be targeted, as the state was registering pre-Islamic shrines and tombs decorated with anamorphic depictions on UNESCO's world heritage list in 2008. Her thesis puts forward evidence for real estate and tourism related reasons behind the wave of demolishing at the time.

Other well-known sites affected include but are not limited to the tomb of Eve in Jeddah (as mentioned by Angelo Pesce in *Jiddah portrait of an Arabian city*) and the Ajyad Ottoman Fortress in Makkah. The latter causing geopolitical tensions between Turkiye and Saudi Arabia.

<sup>11</sup> Alarm over Saudi plan to remove tomb of Prophet Muhammad | middle east eye. Accessed November 3, 2024

Among the destroyed sites, the destruction of Ottoman imperial remains most likely are not due to Wahhabi conservatism. Ottoman Hejaz train line, houses, cemeteries, fortresses and more are known to be demolished until recently. The demolition of the Ajyad Fortress in 2002 was declared by the Turkish Cultural Minister of the time as "... an approach that aims to erase the Turkish period from [Saudi Arabian] history and the world".<sup>12</sup>

What to do with tangible reminders of past regimes is not easy to answer. Although their place in collective memory may remain negative, Roosmalen argues that *"The willingness to acknowledge, study and appreciate heritage from colonial times will differ from county to country but is indispensable for a successful project"*<sup>13</sup>

The Ottoman rule over the Arabian peninsula at its greatest extent was only in Al-Hasa, Hejaz and Assir regions. The Ottoman systematic approach to conquering neighbouring lands with the intention to create an Islamic caliphate is arguably different than European models of establishing trade and military colonies overseas. Additionally, the core Najd region where the House of Saud originate from was never conquered by the Ottomans. Hence Saudi Arabia today, take pride in never being colonised. For such reasons, it is not directly possible to make comparisons with European colonialism and apply the knowledge we have about post-colonial heritage reparations.

<sup>12</sup> "Saudi Government Demolishes Historic Ottoman Castle," World Socialist Web Site, accessed November 22, 2024

<sup>13</sup> Van Roosmalen, Pauline. "Changing Views on Colonial Heritage." Identification and Documentation of Modern Heritage, UNESCO-World Heritage Centre, Paris, 2003, 122-28.

## Interest in Built Heritage

In European history, it is nearly agreed upon researchers when and how the interest in antiquities and preservation efforts of built heritage has begun. The awareness of culturally significant monuments and the varying ideologies for their safeguard for future generations are written into charters, books and have been studied extensively.

In this sense, Saudi Arabia presents a unique case for the development of heritage preservation due to clashing attitudes towards tangible heritage, lack of systematised record keeping and poor musealization. The difficulty in creating a continuous national narrative stems from the vastly different significance of built heritage for the community dispersed on the peninsula and the lack of promoting pluralism in national identity.

Nevertheless, today Saudi Arabia is home to the many still existing built heritage, including vernacular dwellings, mosques, industrial areas, archaeological sites and a total of seven World Heritage Sites. The sudden shift in the approach to heritage is closely linked with the atmosphere created with reforms being implemented in the country.

The traditional architecture is known to be preserved by the lack of growing population in cities until the urban and architectural developments following the growth of the economy in the 60s. It is also widely known that the historic cities of Makkah and Medina, housing two of the holiest mosques for



the Islamic world, have consistently been planned and redesigned over the centuries. Empirically however, it is possible to observe that the development of these sites, were not carried out with the intention of restoring the site, but to rather renovate it. Even the holy Kaaba, believed to be constructed by Prophet Abraham and Ishamel, have been rebuilt over the years, last major work to strengthen the foundations being in 1996<sup>14</sup>. The task to host millions of pilgrims every year, has pushed the area towards fast large scale urban expansions. The need for commercial areas, transport networks and accommodation has made the urban fabric completely unrecognisable from how it was 135 years before.

It is possible to argue that the interest in Islamic built heritage has always been present. The conceptualisation of these sites is directly linked with their role in religion, not as tangible objects that require conservation for extended durability, but symbolic structures that can be renovated, repaired and rebuilt within the framework of their use, which is clearly defined by Islamic scripture.

Bagader (2016) argues that until the establishment of the Supreme Commission for Tourism in 2000, there was “no concept of built heritage conservation in Saudi Arabia (in general)”. He argues that gulf countries at the time, viewed the concept of built heritage solely as “political state heritage”<sup>15</sup> with the tendency to preserve the national legacy, mostly those of royal power.

<sup>14</sup> Haddad, Mohammed. “See How Mecca Has Changed over the Past 100 Years.” See how Mecca has changed over the past 100 years | Al Jazeera English, July 15, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Bagader, Mohammed Abubaker A. “The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015: The Case of Historic Jeddah.” Research Explorer The University of Manchester, 2016.

Historic Jeddah appears to be the first exception. Under *Protection Law of 1981*, to preserve buildings of at least 100 years of age, the urban houses of Al Balad neighbourhood was listed. Today Al-Balad is still the main point of interest in Jeddah as it paved the way for the evolution of preservation policies in the kingdom.

## 3.2 Evolution of Administrative Policies Concerning Historic Preservation

Bagadir (2016), investigates the evolution of policies regarding built heritage in the kingdom between 1970 to 2015. In his Ph.D. thesis, the author states that until 2008, there wasn't enough awareness in the kingdom to actively put effort into preservation of historical sites. The earliest known government body established in 1976, the Antiquities and Museums Agency abruptly reported to the Ministry of Education and therefore not prioritised. In fact the lack of specialist institution is commonly regarded as the reason behind the loss of many built heritage sites of the kingdom.

The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) was originally founded in the year 2000 for promoting local tourism and creating new job opportunities for Saudi nationals. However, due to the substantial link between the industry and national heritage, the establishment had become responsible for “promoting the contribution of antiquity in the cultural and

economic development of the citizens”<sup>16</sup> This economic interest and lack of transparency in laws regarding historic architecture did not prove efficient in preservation efforts, until the clarifications performed more recently

### 3.3 Key Actors Today

Today the key actors in the kingdom are more unequivocal compared to their historical counterparts. The main governmental department is the Ministry of Culture established in 2018, following the Saudi Vision 2030. The new modernisation movement suggests that culture is “indispensable for our quality of life” and promises to “pay a rich tribute to its [the country’s] authentic culture”.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, the Heritage Commission under the Ministry of Culture is specifically responsible for the protecting and management of heritage sites, and supervises divisions such as National Antiquities Register and National Urban Heritage Register.<sup>18</sup>

Other large establishments in the country include the Saudi International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM, a member since 2000) Saudi Heritage Preservation Society (active since 2010), Saudi ICOMOS (active since 2011) and the UNESCO since 1947 (executive council member since 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Saudi commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH). Accessed November 3, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> “Welcome to Moc Homepage.” Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture. Accessed November 3, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> “About Us.” Heritage Commission. Accessed February 6, 2025.

In specific cases such as the fast development of Al-Ula, a Royal Commission of Al-Ula was launched independently from other heritage sites in 2017. This unique decision was made following the launch of the Vision 2030 to preserve the natural and cultural heritage while sustainably developing the area into a global tourism destination. The Royal Commission is responsible today for many strategic developments including urban master-plans, preservation of cultural, natural and wildlife protection, education and research projects in the area.

Other stakeholders are local governments, non governmental organisations,



The Royal  
Comission of  
AlUla, **Tour-  
ism Sector  
Building**



the Saudi  
ICOMOS  
Offices in  
Old Town,  
Al Ula



private sectors, academia, land owners and the residents<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, there are many private companies, in the fields of consulting, design, planning, engineering and more which are involved in the development of heritage sites.

---

<sup>19</sup> Rcu. "About RCU." About the Royal Commission for AlUla. Accessed November 4, 2024.

# Building a New Identity Through Heritage Interpretation

## 04

### 4.0 Vision 2030 and Recent Reforms

Saudi Arabia's ambitious project launched in 2016 aims to bring substantial change to many aspects of Saudi life. The project that encompasses many sectors including tourism and heritage, aims to create a more vibrant and ambitious society that perseveres for a green economy and put Saudi Arabia on the world map.<sup>1</sup> The project led by the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, puts the country's heritage sites that were previously marginalised, in the centre of its international appeal.

This chapter aims to demonstrate the fast changing environment in Saudi Arabia through the analysis of the official Vision 2030 document and a collection of newspaper articles. The articles are collected based on their relevance to the new vibrant identity aimed by the Vision 2030, side-lining the conservative criticism and consequently affect the perception of built heritage of the nation. They were collected from digital newspapers in English and are presented under 3 categories in chronological order of their digital publication to create a continuous narrative.

The detailed context showcased in this chapter is essential in portraying an accurate representation of the current atmosphere in the kingdom, and therefore provides important clues to how built heritage has been fundamental for the nation and community building exercise ongoing today.

---

<sup>1</sup> "A Thriving Economy." Vision 2030, 2024.





Vision 2030 posters around the city of Jeddah with the slogan "We Dream and We Achieve"



## Important remarks from the Vision 2030

The document “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Vision 2030” published by the Saudi Arabian cabinet on 25 April 2016 provides a detailed blueprint of the next 15 years. The text by the crown prince addressing the citizens is comprised of an 85 page long but simple explanation of future commitments, investments social reforms as prioritised by the government. The vision (and therefore the publication) is organised under 3 main pillars:

### “A VIBRANT SOCIETY

- A Vibrant Society.. with Strong Roots*
- A Vibrant Society.. with Fulfilling Lives*
- A Vibrant Society.. with Strong Foundations*

### A THRIVING ECONOMY

- A Thriving Economy.. Rewarding Opportunities*
- A Thriving Economy.. Investing for the Long-term*
- A Thriving Economy.. Open for Business*
- A Thriving Economy.. Leveraging its Unique Position*

### AN AMBITIOUS NATION

- An Ambitious Nation.. Effectively Governed*
- An Ambitious Nation.. Responsibly Enabled*

### HOW TO ACHIEVE OUR VISION?<sup>2</sup>

The document is decorated with photos of Saudi architectural monuments(including a figure from AlUla then closed to tourism) and infographics to illustrate the mission to the general public. The clear figures for the investment budget of each category together with the new authorities established to continue the mission are consistent with their intention “to reach the highest levels of transparency and governance”.

<sup>2</sup> “Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” Riyadh: The government of Saudi Arabia, April 25, 2016.

Notably, the text distinctively mentions identity and cultural heritage. Some of the major targets and statements are in aligned with the **United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals**. Some points which are relevant to this thesis includes:

“  
-We take immense pride in the historical and cultural **legacy of our Saudi, Arab, and Islamic heritage**. ..We recognize the importance of preserving this sophisticated heritage in order to promote national unity and consolidate true Islamic and Arab values.

-We will endeavour to strengthen, preserve and highlight our **national identity** so that it can guide the lives of future generations. We will do so by keeping true to our national values and principles, ..

-We will continue to work on the restoration of national, Arab, Islamic and **ancient cultural sites** and strive to have them **registered internationally** to make them accessible to everyone and, in the process, create cultural events and build world-class museums which will attract visitors from near and far. This will create a living witness to our ancient heritage, showcasing **our prominent place in history and on the map of civilizations**

-We will support the efforts of regions, governorates, non-profit and private sectors to organize **cultural events** ..We will seek to offer a variety of cultural venues – such as libraries, arts and museums .. Among our commitments: The largest Islamic museum

- Reshaping our **academic and educational system**. ... reinforce the fabric of society by providing students with the compassion, knowledge, and behaviours necessary for resilient and independent characters to emerge

- Providing **equal opportunities** ..Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy.

- ..Improve visa issuance procedures for visitors, and prepare and develop our **historical and heritage sites**”

Additionally, an official 5 year update “the Journey so far” was published by the government to illustrate the progress and the upcoming steps.



## Influence of the Vision 2030 on the Conceptualization of Heritage in the Kingdom

Notably, the vision established a *General Entertainment Authority* in 2016 responsible for the entertainment sector in the country. Governed by Turki Al-Sheikh, this authority is also responsible for the annual national day celebrations (see next chapter for further discussion of national days).

The official published guidelines for the national day include: national songs, a list of chosen **identity projects** to represent national achievements, the motto “we dream and we achieve”, specific posters for indoors, outdoors, flags, airplane screens, airport trolleys, cars, banners, “flags in mall”, drone shows etc.

The graphics featuring a man and a woman proudly centred equally in their traditional attire is very striking. Even more so, they are surrounded by built heritage projects, including a representation of an ancient Nabatean tomb from AlUla that was once believed to be cursed for Muslims. Using built heritage that was once a taboo in the country, under “identity projects” proves the motivation to create a new identity based on heritage. The posters include other ongoing projects such as the Line mega-project, Soudah Peaks mountain resort, Sindala island tourism development project and Diriyah project as the historic home of the Saud dynasty.

This image launches to the public the new intentions towards Saudi identity and narrative of heritage. The poster which in various forms been placed in



A screenshot showing the guidelines to celebrate the 94th Saudi National Day from the official website “Saudi National Day 94.” General Entertainment Authority. Accessed February 6, 2025.

every corner, communicates the aspirations to advertise and promote historic Saudi sites and to invite the citizens, men and women to take part in development projects. It introduces a new concept to the Saudi Arabian lifestyle, stating that built heritage is now an important aspect of our national identity, and what we choose to do with it matters.

This sudden implementation of a new concept of heritage may be due to the ambitious goal to transform the country by 2030. While the time is limited, the aspirations of fast developments are being completed at an incredible speed. Another probable explanation to this sudden introduction is to take advantage of the young population to foster a generation that is more proud, well-educated, and distance them from the previous belief systems causing damage to built heritage.

The top-down implementation of a new concept of heritage is evident. Additionally, promotion of celebration of cultural heritage, appears to be a curated project. It has chosen to create a strong emphasis on certain periods to highlight the establishment of the royal dynasty as well as the recent success in the ongoing projects. The formulation of a new heritage concept within the realm of heritage would generally involve more public participation. The reach to remote and under-represented communities is vital before top-down interventions to heritage.

Despite the transparency efforts mentioned in the Vision 2030, the sudden change in perception towards heritage is a result of the decisions made by

the government entities. Whether these developments would have been as successful, if the conservative public was more involved is debatable, but an important point to make. However, the top-down implementation will influence the long-term success of the projects, if the education of the public with the new cultural values is not successful. The efforts to inform and convince the public of these changes are shown through advertisements, educational training courses and new holidays dedicated to celebrating the Saudi identity.

## Traditions, Customs and National Building

Making a distinction between tradition and custom is essential in such social engineering experiments and models. While traditions establish continuity with glorified history, they are specific and strongly bonded with values, belief systems and principles. On the other hand, customs are schemas established by practice. They vary and usually don't mean more than habitual acts. Changing customs is inevitable, and novel traditions are more common than we expect.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Saudi Arabia, it is the customs that are being changed rapidly. Not long after the clothing restrictions for women were formally lifted in 2018, public fashion and music events started showcasing women in skirts, dresses and even bodysuits. Only 2 years after the driving ban for women was lifted the first female Saudi racing driver made her debut in Riyadh. Similarly the Red Sea Film Festival in Jeddah was announced only 3 years after the decision to reopen cinemas in the kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> The invention of tradition, March 26, 2012.



FEATURED STORIES

### Saudi Arabia's women vote in election for first time

12 December 2015

...in local elections on Saturday December 12

Women are allowed to vote and stand for election

12/12/2015

### Saudi Arabia driving ban on women to be lifted

27 September 2017

Saudi women's driving activist Manal al

27/09/2017

### Saudi women should not have to wear abaya robes, top cleric says

10 February 2018

Saudi women have to wear the abaya b

10/02/2018

### Saudi Arabia's first female racer, Reema Juffali, charts a unique motorsports path

By Madeline Coleman Mar 8, 2024

A Mini Cooper changed t

ali's life.

08/03/2021

### Saudi Arabia commits to net zero emissions by 2060

23 October 2021

The world's biggest oil exp

t its carbon

23/10/2021

### Saudi Arabia: 28,000 women apply for 30 train driver jobs

17 February 2022

A rail company recruiting 30 female train drivers in Saudi Arabia says it has received 28,000 applications.

17/02/2022

### First Arab female astronaut reaches space station

22 May 2023

David Gritten BBC News

22/05/2023

### Saudi Arabia to get first alcohol shop in more than 70 years

24 January 2024

Graeme Baker BBC News

A bar tender mixes a non-alcohol

could soon be heading to the Saudi

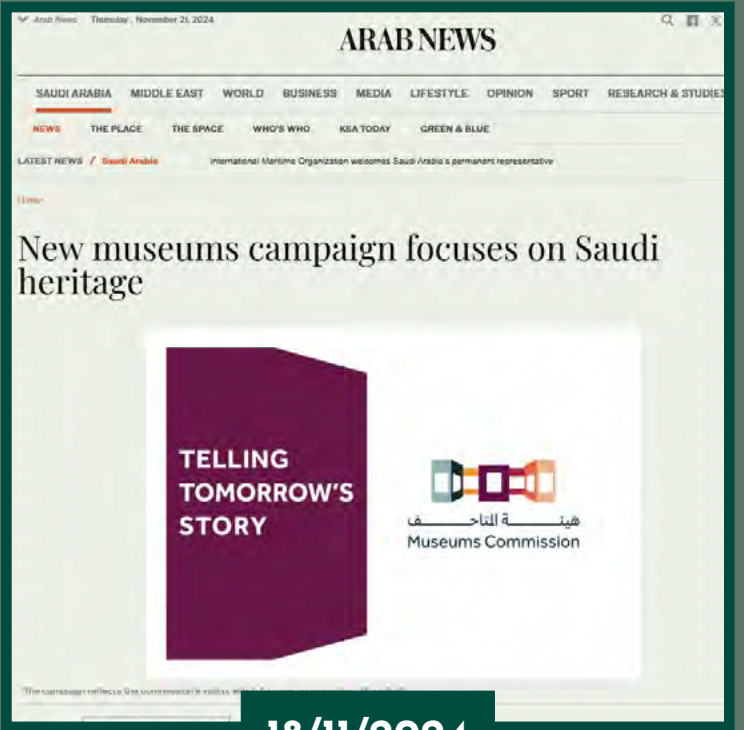
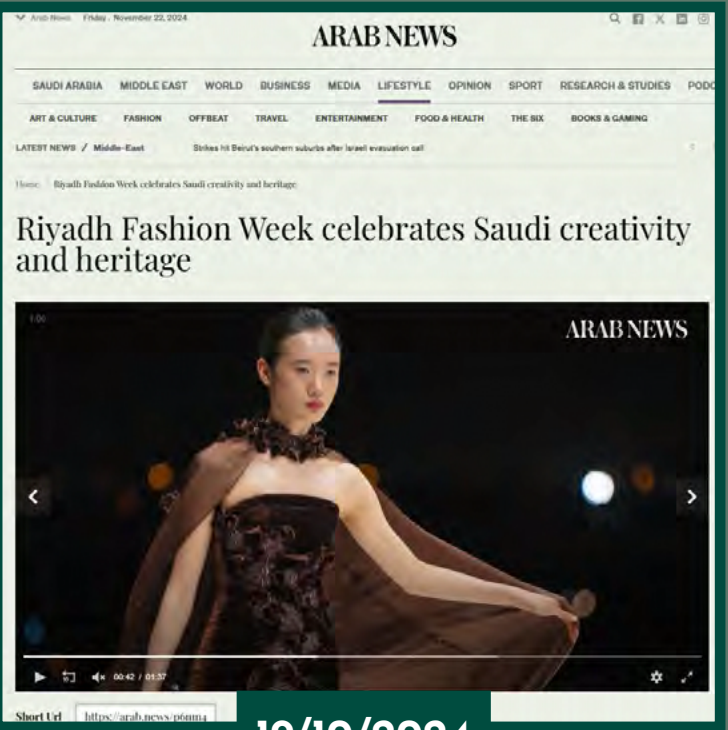
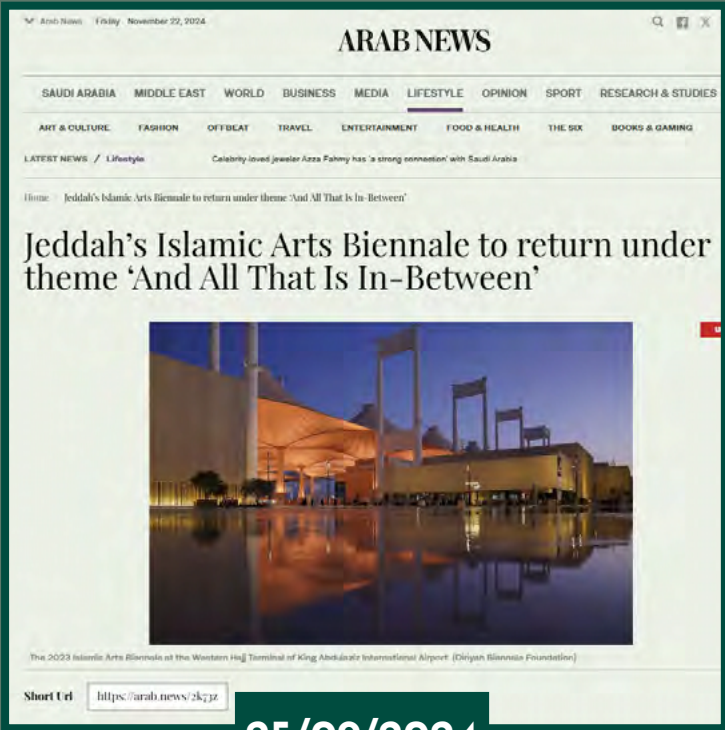
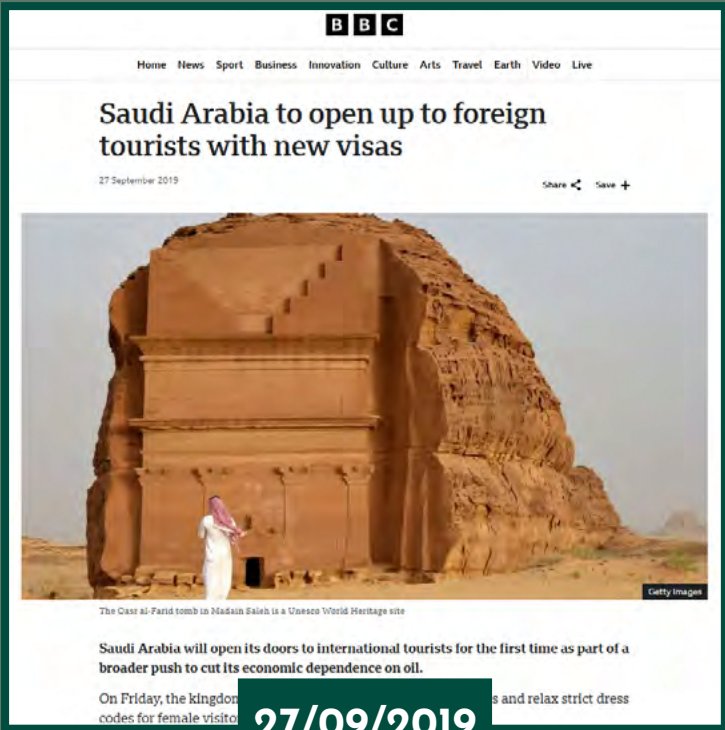
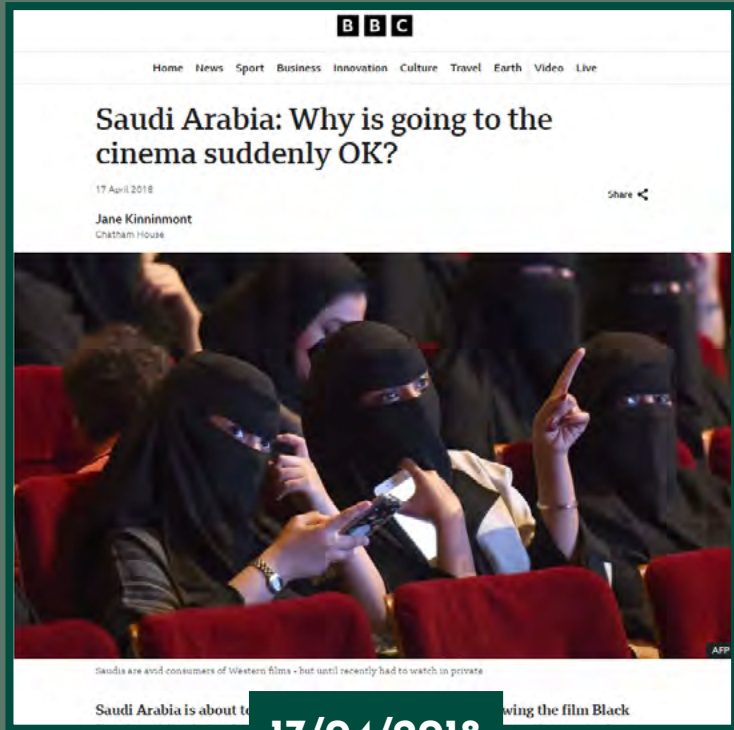
24/01/2024

"Saudi Arabia's Women Vote in Election for First Time." BBC, December 12, 2015.  
"Saudi Arabia Driving Ban on Women to Be Lifted," September 27, 2017.  
"Saudi Arabia Commits to Net Zero Emissions by 2060", October 23, 2021.  
"Saudi Arabia: 28,000 Women Apply for 30 Train Driver Jobs", February 17, 2022.

"Saudi Women Should Not Have to Wear Abaya Robes, Top Cleric Says." BBC, February 10, 2018.  
Coleman, Madeline. "Saudi Arabia's First Female Racer, Reema Juffali, Charts a Unique Motorsports Path." The New York Times, March 8, 2024.  
Gritten, David. "First Arab Female Astronaut Reaches Space Station." BBC, May 22, 2023.  
Baker, Graeme. "Saudi Arabia to Get First Alcohol Shop in More than 70 Years." BBC, January 24, 2024.



# FEATURED STORIES

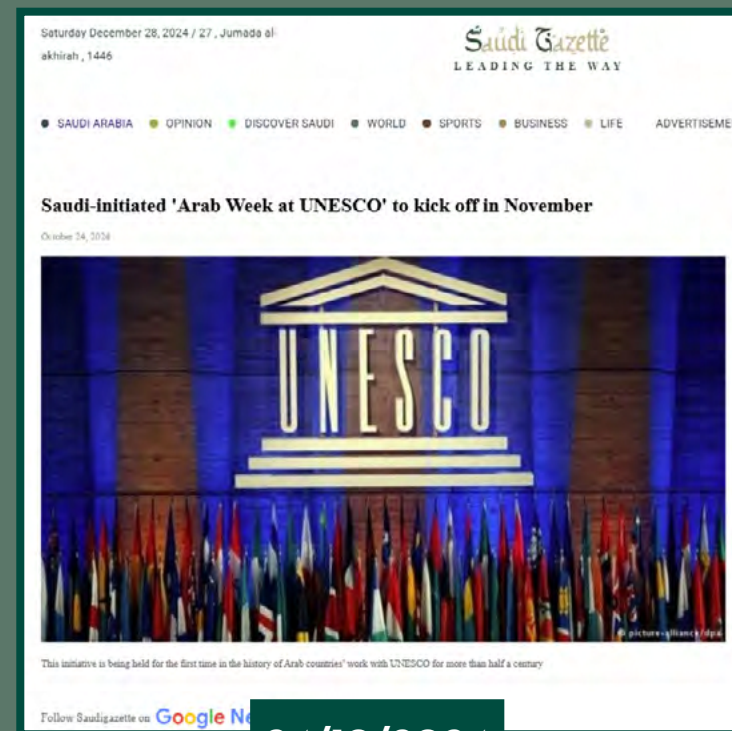
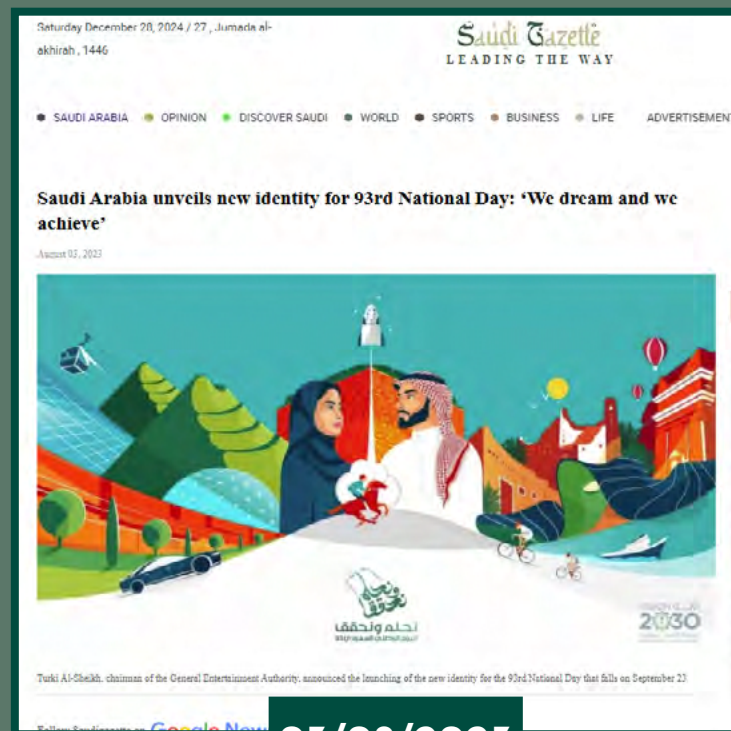
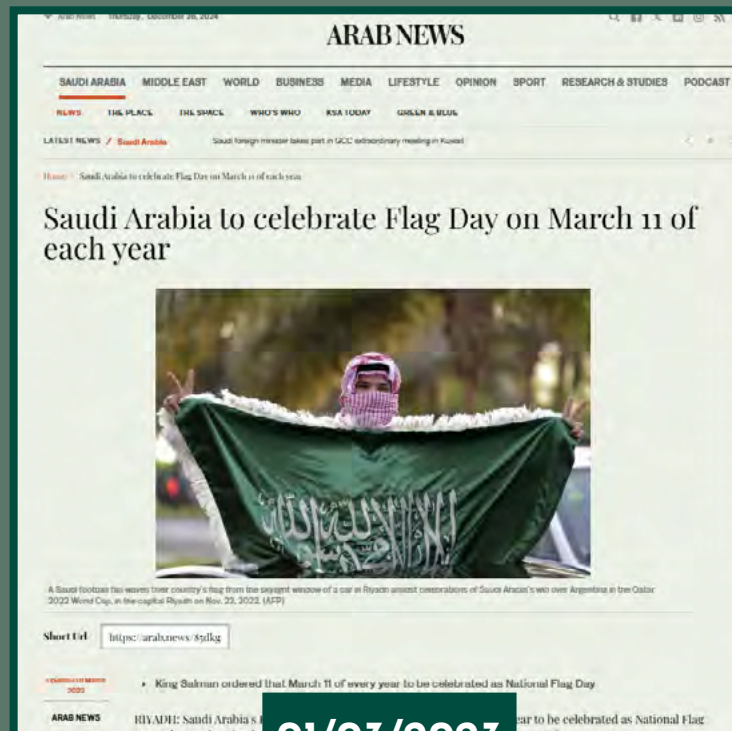
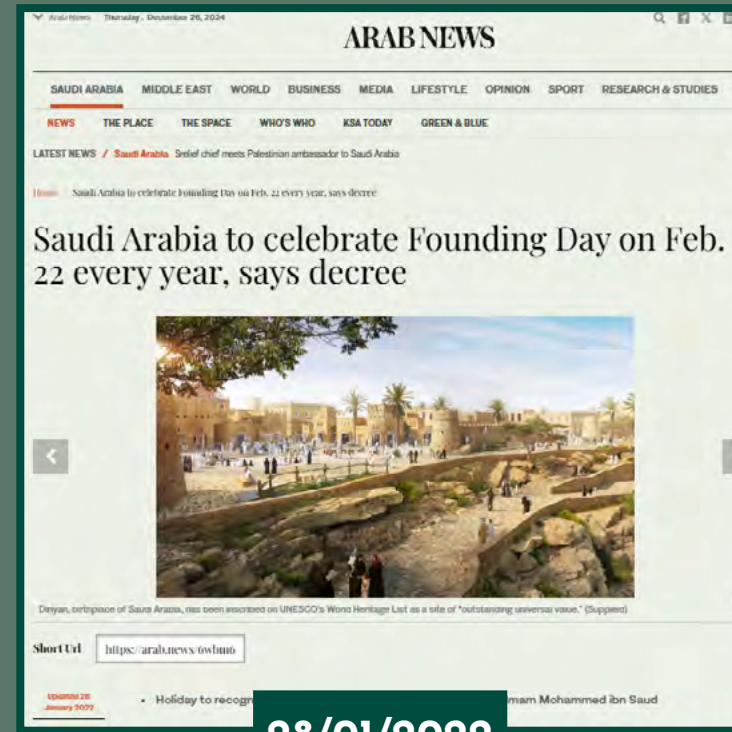
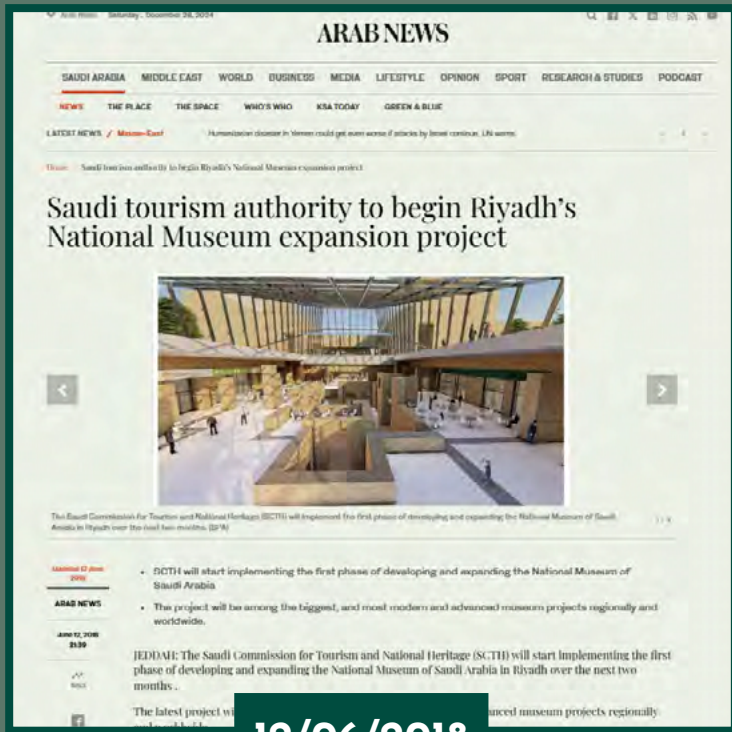
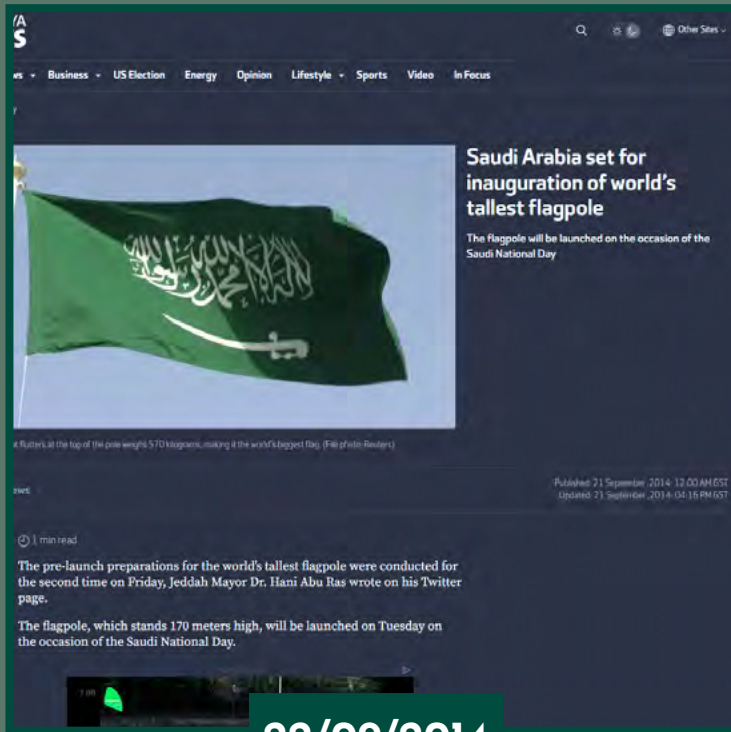


Kinninmont, Jane. "Saudi Arabia: Why Is Going to the Cinema Suddenly OK?" BBC, April 17, 2018.  
Gardner, Frank. "Saudi Arabia to Open up to Foreign Tourists with New Visas," September 27, 2019.  
Usher, Sebastian. "First Saudi-Penned Opera Opens in Riyadh." BBC, April 26, 2024.  
Bager, Jasmine. "Jeddah's Islamic Arts Biennale to Return under Theme 'And All That Is In-Between.'" Arab News, September 25, 2024.

Hewgill, Christian. "Saudi Arabia Grand Prix: A Race for Equal Rights." BBC, December 4, 2021.  
Goodfellow, Melanie. "Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Film Festival Launches Defining First Edition." Screen Daily, December 6, 2021.  
Jambi, Rahaf. "Riyadh Fashion Week Celebrates Saudi Creativity and Heritage Previous." Arab News, October 19, 2024.  
"New Museums Campaign Focuses on Saudi Heritage", November 18, 2024.



# FEATURED STORIES



"Saudi Arabia Set for Inauguration of World's Tallest Flagpole ." Alarabiya News, September 21, 2014.  
"Saudi Tourism Authority to Begin Riyadh's National Museum Expansion Project." Arab News, June 12, 2018.  
Chulov, Martin, and Tom Phillips. "Saudi Arabia Declares Public Holiday to Mark World Cup Win over Argentina." The Guardian, November 22, 2022.  
"Saudi Arabia to Celebrate Flag Day on March 11 of Each Year." Arab News, March 1, 2023.

"Al-Khorayef Launches 'Made in Saudi' Program to Back National Products & Services." Saudi Gazette, March 28, 2021.  
Nugali, Noor. "Saudi Arabia to Celebrate Founding Day on Feb. 22 Every Year, Says Decree." Arab News, January 27, 2022.  
"Saudi Arabia Unveils New Identity for 93rd National Day: 'We Dream and We Achieve.'" Saudi Gazette, August 3, 2023.  
"Saudi-Initiated 'Arab Week at UNESCO' to Kick off in November." Saudi Gazette, October 24, 2024.



**Nabatean tombs illuminated with the Saudi Arabian coat of arms and flag on Founding Day.**  
Experience Al Ula.  
Accessed December 28, 2024.



**Saudi Founding Day celebrations in Historic City of Jeddah.** November 19, 2024. Regency Holidays.



**Diriyah mud-brick city during Founding Day celebrations.** February 16, 2024. Fact Magazine.



Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly going through a changing identity (see 4.3). The conservative values upheld by the government are quickly being replaced by “modern” values (also see 4.3). In a country where social customs are evolving so rapidly, it is vital to emphasize some level of continuity with familiar cultural traditions. In other words, when customs change overnight, the traditional values are emphasized to maintain a common narrative.

The political aim to foster a more ambitious and vibrant nation is achieved through a reinstated sense of patriotism. The most apparent example of this nation building exercise is the introduction of new national holidays. There has been four new national holidays in the since 2022, two of which will continue to be celebrated annually.

#### **Saudi National Day**

94th anniversary of the establishment of the country was celebrated for the first time in 2005

#### **Saudi Founding Day**

295th anniversary of the First Saudi state in Diriyah was celebrated for the first time since 2022

#### **Saudi Flag Day**

86th anniversary of the adoption of the Saudi flag was celebrated on 2023 after the introduction for the first time in 2023

Unprecedented practices bring an interesting topic of discussion. In many instances relating to the national holidays, the holidays themselves are advertised to be older than their first celebration date. Many news articles claiming to celebrate 90th national day, actually mean 90th anniversary of independ-



ence, being celebrated only since 2005. These misleading articles with the intention to establish a more rooted pedigree must in practice be very efficient considering the response from the public who filled the streets of all major cities in national holidays. Nation building goes hand in hand with the re-conceptualization of heritage in the kingdom as cultural sites are now more in the spotlight than ever. New traditions as well as the old ones aim to promote and celebrate built heritage sites as places of national importance.

## 4.1 Comparison to European Examples

The following two comparisons made are chosen to demonstrate two very different scenarios of how tradition and archaeology are used in nation building and whether a similar route can be implemented in the case of Saudi Arabia.

### British Monarchical Ceremonies

It is interesting to make a comparison to European dynasties and how they display their sublime presence in times of social change. In the British royal family, the ceremonies performed in great scales are now seen as pillars of continuity. They represent cultural heritage and its ability to unite people with their longevity, historical narrative and ability to represent collective identity. For example, royal coronations, weddings and even funerals are community events that reiterate the common narrative under the British monarchy.

However, funerals in Islam are quick, the burial sites are mostly non-symbolic and not often visited. Coronations are closed, modest and unpublicised pledg-

es of allegiance. Weddings similarly are private family events, far from being national icons or attempt pageantry in the public eye. The general public in Saudi Arabia do not know each member of the royal family as the family is significantly larger in comparison. Even for royals these practices are largely incompatible with grand ceremonial practices for cultural and religious reasons. Therefore a similar uniting method is not adaptable to Saudi Arabian customs and is not expected to be put into practice anytime soon.

### Formulating a Turkish Identity with Archaeology

Another example that will illustrate a different perspective about nation building is from Atatürk's early republican Türkiye. It is worth noting that many of the reforms in Saudi Arabia today parallel those of Türkiye's revolution in the first half of the 20th century, including the changing dress code, giving women the right to vote and launching a 'made locally' campaign. Additionally, Atatürk has promoted the a publication named "General outlines of Turkish History" which had become the blueprint of textbooks for high schools. The professors in charge of creating this were tasked to "complete our national independence also in the field of science".

The aim of this publication was to create a national narrative that differed from the misrepresentation of previous theses. He has observed the Turkic language *steles* found in central Asia and has traced the journey of the Turkic tribes. His idea of the Turkish nation had roots in Hittites which were present in the ancestral land of Anatolia.

His efforts in extending the timeline before the Islamic Ottoman empire was crucial in establishing a new republican identity that shaped the national image from 1930s onward. Similarly in Saudi Arabia a new historical narrative is being created. New evidences are being excavated and displayed. New museums opened and more research being done. While Saudi Arabia is not trying to conceive a new narrative of a new Turkish ethnicity through archaeology, they are claiming deeper roots in the lands of their ancestors. Creating a justified explanation to the roots of the language and traditions, using built heritage as the witness and the hard proof of this new concept.

## 4.2 Role of Heritage in Nation Building

The sudden change of attitude to built heritage is evidently changing one important thing about the country's history: the time-line.

The national narrative of the history of the country once started uniformly at one of the two points: the start of Islam or the unifications of the tribes under the first King AbdulAziz. Any contradictory evidence were kept in the shadows until now. With the historical time-line being extended further back, it is finally possible to deduce the origins of Arabic language, agriculture and animal husbandry in the peninsula, the relationship between the Romans and the ancient Nabataeans in the North. It is thanks to the archaeological excavation in the Nabataean sites that we discover the continuity of traditional water management systems between civilisations of the region.

Heritage has also ignited a new domestic tourism trend in the kingdom that has consolidated the national pride. Especially on national days and festivals, it can be seen that ancient sites are being embraced as national cornerstones that contribute to the development of the identity. They are decorated with national flags and have already made their place in collective memory as places to gather and celebrate.

The role of heritage is undoubtedly changing. It is becoming more significant in the society. As the laws of protection are becoming more evident, they are becoming a vital part of the urban landscape in Saudi Arabia. They now are strongly bound to the national pride, as many of the achievements of the nation surround heritage sites. They represent the Saudi Arabian capability of creating global tourist destinations. Heritage means a new industry where





many women take leadership positions, more than it was ever seen in the history of the kingdom. The sites themselves are becoming landmarks, hosting celebrations, festivals and cultural institutions. It is inevitable that they are becoming a part of collective memory and identity as important actors in shaping the country as we know it today.

In conclusion the role of heritage is vital in social changes to fulfil the promise of Vision 2030 through a new time-line and more nationalist society. A strong national identity is authenticated with remote connections to the past. Built heritage has become a destination, whether for culture, entertainment, celebration or tourism.

### 4.3 New Identity? Revival? Westernisation?

One of the interviewees brought up an important discussion topic, which is whether there is a new identity in Saudi Arabia or it is simply a revival of the open-minded mindset set of the 60s and 70s. Until this point of the thesis, I have referred to the changes as a launch of new identity. This is partially due to the lack of evidence for the lifestyle in the 60s and 70s. There is very little information available in English, let alone dependable sources relevant to heritage. There is no record of a thriving cultural atmosphere in that period, hence a comparison to today under a 'revival' was not considered. A research into the understanding of heritage in that period can be very interesting and needed in literature.

Another reason behind my emphasis on the **new national identity** is due to new initiatives in relation to being a global tourism destination, committing to sustainability, promoting even non-Islamic sites, hosting large-scale music/film/fashion events, increasing opportunities and rights given to women. All these key factors shaping the identity today, does not appear to have happened before. Therefore, it is assumed the ambition is to form a new identity based on existing traditions and customs, rooted in the country's deep tangible and intangible heritage.

It can be seen that many Western values rooted in the Enlightenment including pluralism, rationalism, equality, sustainability, intellectual empowerment are being implemented in the Saudi Arabian society. Some publications question whether non-traditional values are implemented under *modernity*. It is crucial to identify the correct terminology to define the current reforms in the country. Modernity is inherently a Western concept. It dates back after the second world war, when the industrial cities in Northern Europe started growing exponentially. The growing influence of cities, increasing population, and new economies on the Western urban culture has become associated with modernity. Yet in the contemporary world, modernity differs from Westernisation.

As Einstadt puts it "to explain the history of modernity is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs."<sup>4</sup> Modernity entails a program of creating collective identities within cultural and political dimensions. While the West has a "monopoly"<sup>4</sup> on mo-

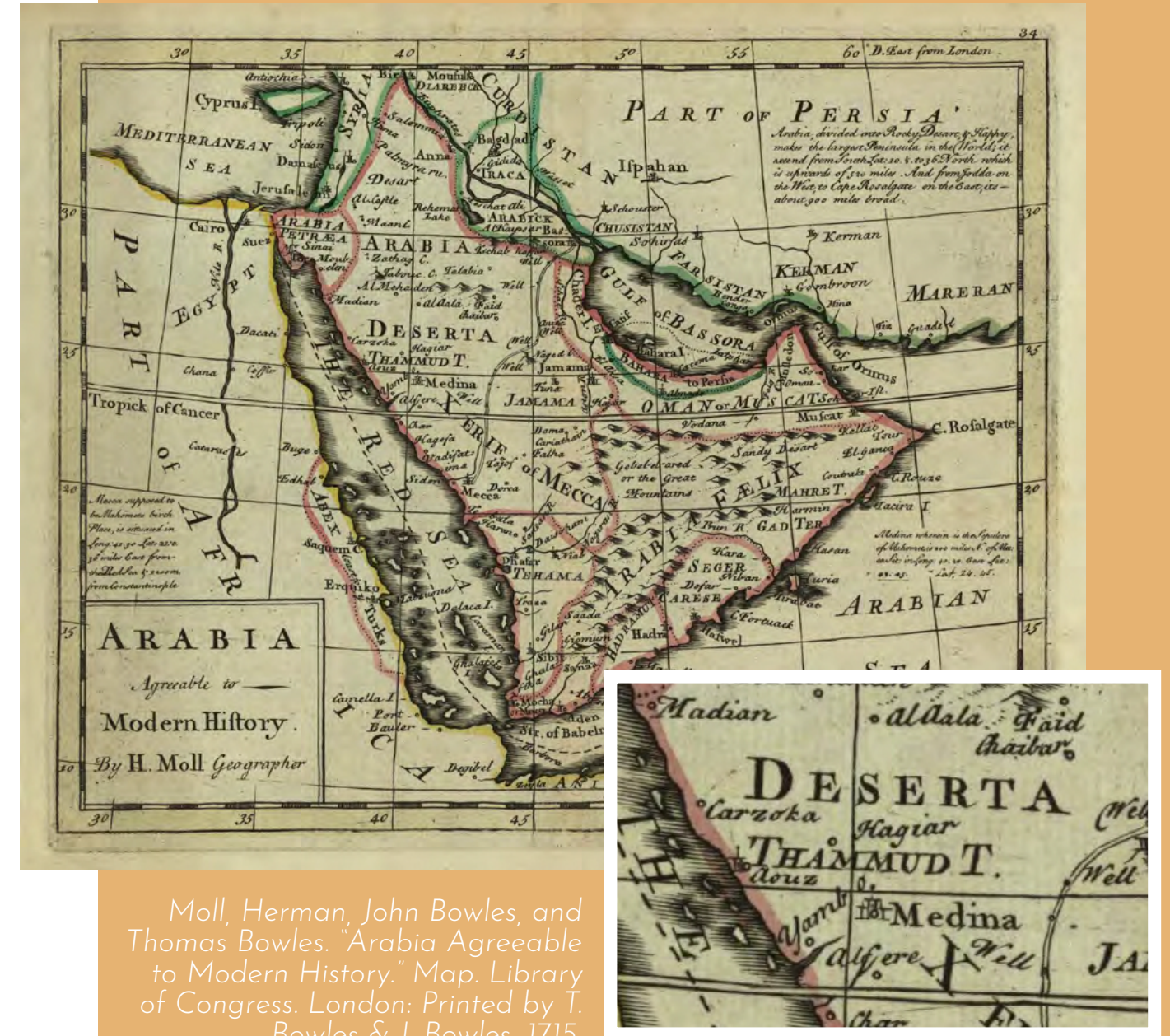
<sup>4</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*, January 1, 2000.

dernity, it is not the only pattern of modernity.

Therefore, we cannot say that the reforms in Saudi Arabia are aiming to westernise the country solely because they follow similar patterns of development. In many ways, the kingdom is taking local traditions into consideration while implementing new social changes in the country. In direct comparison with Atatürk's reforms, where in an attempt to modernise the nation the dress code was completely westernised under the hat revolution. Under the new law the hats that symbolise backwardness were replaced with formal western attire. In the case for Saudi Arabia, the freedom to wear anything was granted to women, regardless of their western-ness. Hence, the changes implemented are not aiming directly to make the society more western, but to make it more progressive.



# Cultural and Economic Development of Al Ula



Moll, Herman, John Bowles, and Thomas Bowles. "Arabia Agreeable to Modern History." Map. Library of Congress. London: Printed by T. Bowles & J. Bowles, 1715.

Al Ula is a farming village in the north-west of the kingdom that is home to many tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It is home to a group of archaeological sites which are extremely significant in shaping the Saudi Arabian culture today. It is a leading example of the Vision 2030's ability and motivation to transform the built heritage sites. The area is estimated to be inhabited for 5000 BCE, therefore it represents a variety of sites that perfectly exemplify the changing approach to built heritage.

# 05



## 5.0 Tangible and Intangible Heritage

### Natural Heritage

The natural geological formations of Al Ula display a beautiful landscape unique to the North Western area of the kingdom. The red hills surrounding the entire city are made up of red rigged volcanic rocks. The oldest rocks in the region date back to 900 million years.<sup>1</sup> The varieties of rocks found in the area are witnesses to the transformation of the landscape from molten rocks, to underwater deltas through millions of years.

The unique geography make the lifestyle in this region very different. The area is an oasis rich in greenery in contrast to the difficult desert climate in most part of the country. The agricultural practices dominated by date farming showcase the historic watering mechanism sourcing the local wells. For centuries this agricultural advantage has made the area an important stop in the Incense route bringing the region wealth and consequently the name Arabia Felix.<sup>2</sup>

Today, it is possible to camp and hike in certain areas with restrictions. Many paid hiking trips are promoted. One particularly scenic valley housing multiple high end resorts, is privatised and only accessible for visitors with a reservation for the hotels or restaurants.

<sup>1</sup> Rcu. "Geology of Alula." Geology of AlUla | The Royal Commission for AlUla. Accessed December 31, 2024. <https://www.rcu.gov.sa/en/about-rcu/geology-of-alula>.

<sup>2</sup> "The History of Saudi's Trade Routes." Explore Saudi Arabia. Accessed February 6, 2025.





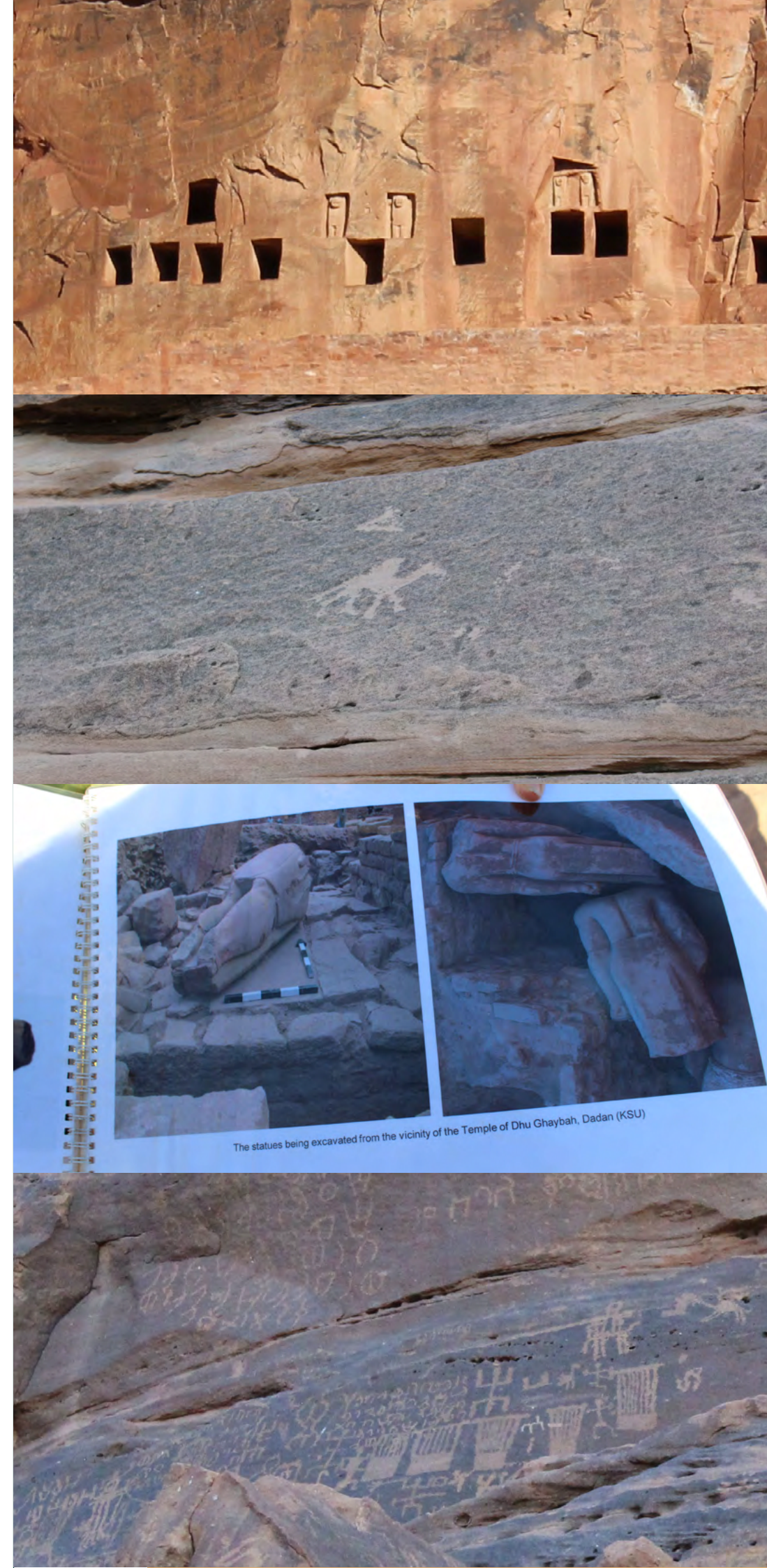
## Dadanite, Ma'in and Lihyanite Kingdoms

The ancient kingdoms of the peninsula are one of the earliest archaeological remains in the country. Some discoveries such as the discovery of the monumental basin was made during the Ottoman empire. In 2021, a joint team of French and Saudi archaeologists have started an excavation campaign. There is much that is still unknown including a general overview.

The evidence found so far is particularly interesting, as the Lihyanite figures of human bodies are comparable to the contemporary Egyptian styles. Some archaeological remains including a 2.3m human sculpture is now displayed on long-term loan in the Louvre Museum, as in general findings from the peninsula are very special and under-represented<sup>3</sup>. It also is possible to see remains which were not buried by the passage of time. Their tombs carved high on mountains as well as many inscriptions on the Jabal Ikhmah mountain are preserved well. The depiction of animals, including the lion carvings on the tombs as well as cattle and camels on the rock inscriptions give us an idea on the wildlife and domestication of animals in that period.

Additionally, these inscriptions show writing in Dadanitic script which is a system of writing from right to left, sharing many similarities with Arabic. Continuing the excavations, and researching these civilisations are essential in understanding the history of the peninsula as well as the origins of the Arabic language.

<sup>3</sup> Thierry Pigot, "A Monumental Lihyanite Statue from Saudi Arabia Deposited from the Royal Commission for Alula (RCU) to the Musée Du Louvre," AFALU-LA, September 6, 2022.





## Nabataean Kingdom

Nabataeans were ancient Arabians during the classical antiquity. They have expanded southwards from Petra to create the sister city of Hegra in Saudi Arabia. Culturally they were influenced by the Roman empire, as they were an ally to the Nabataeans before conquering the region.

Their cities have not yet been fully excavated. It is known that Hegra became really wealthy through the trade route. Unlike Petra, where the city was eventually assimilated into the Roman lifestyle, Hegra does not (yet) appear to showcase a full Roman identity. Today there are over a hundred Nabataean monumental tombs carved onto natural formations. The tombs are scattered around a large landscape in the desert. There is no direct access to tourists, its only available to enter with reservation in advance, with an official guide and a 'ranger'.

The tombs of Hegra, or as it is widely known as Madain Saleh was the first site in Saudi Arabia to be registered on the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 2008. It has a troubled history in the recent past of the kingdom, due to common beliefs that the site is cursed and must not be visited by Muslims. Interviewees who visited Hegra before it was officially opened to the public in 2020 give contradictory ideas. One claims that it was possible to access the tombs easily by presenting an ID card to the guards, that it was not much different than it is today. Others said that there were no entry gates, ticketing or any signs or maps. The entire place was said to be full of wind-blown rubbish.





## Ottoman Presence

The Ottoman empire ruled much of the Western peninsula from the 16th to 20th centuries. The Ottoman mandate in Northern Arabia An important remain from this period is the Hejaz railway are two railway stations (one in Al Ula and one in Mada'in Saleh), including two trains displayed in AlUla and few traces of railway tracks. The remnants of the railway network is now listed on the Tentative World Heritage List.

These two stations are very significant considering the scale of the original railway project, a railway spanning from Damascus to Medinah. A transport network connecting many important Ottoman cities was seen as a danger during the Arab revolt against the Ottomans. Therefore it was one of the first sites to be attacked by the revolting tribes.

An important remark is that the train station in Mada'in Saleh has been transformed into "the Chedi Hegra", a five star hotel. The construction techniques claim to incorporate the historic walls into the project without any damage to the original structure. There is also a fully restored Ottoman era train displayed inside.

The other station of Al Ula however is perhaps the least promoted of all built heritage sites in Al Ula, with no ongoing restoration works, access or information provided on the site for visitors.





## Old town and Islamic Urbanism

The old town of the city of Al Ula is the collection of mud brick houses found in the North West of the major modern settlement today. They were occupied until late 1980s and later abandoned during transition to *modern* developments. They showcase a unique example of Islamic urban planning principles, consisting of over 800 dwellings, mosques, shops and public spaces.

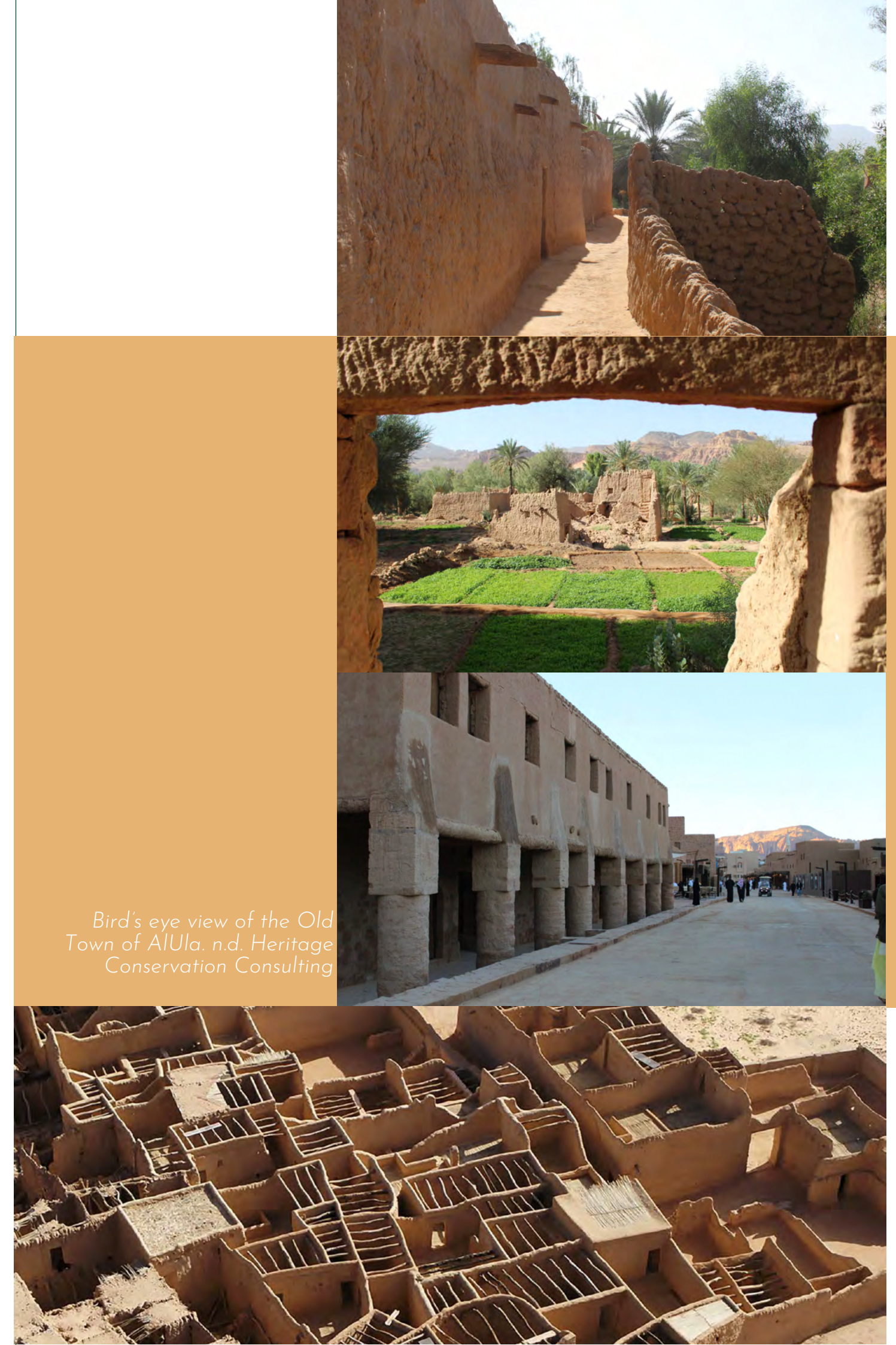
The oasis is the name given to a series of dwellings within the region where agriculture played an important role. These mud houses are surrounded by vast fields, date trees and orchards. It is possible to observe the water management systems built around local wells.

## Intangible Heritage

Some of the intangible heritage that is in the process of heritagization in the kingdom are: the farming practices, oral storytelling, local ways of living, traditional games and crafts near the archaeological area of Al Ula (part of WHL)<sup>4</sup>.

The sudden social changes and steps being taken towards modernisation in the country directly affect intangible heritage and rural communities. Refae (2024) proposes a complimentary framework to Vision 2030 that promotes the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage while promoting community pride.

4 Rafae, Seema. 2024. "Preserving Intangible Heritage: A Framework for Assessing and Safeguarding Cultural Practices in Alula, Saudi Arabia". *History and Cultural Innovation* 1 (1):25-34. <https://journals.e-palli.com/home/index.php/hci/article/view/2529>.





## 5.1 Administrative Changes

2017 the Royal Commission of AlUla was established

2018 the French Saudi Bilateral Agreement was signed

2019 the vision for Al Ula was launched

2021 Al Ula town opened to visitors

2023 Al Ula signs new agreement with Pompidou

2023 Royal Commission of Al Ula and UNESCO sign pioneering agreement for cultural collaboration

2024 Abeer AlAkeel is chosen as the CEO of the Royal Commission of AlUla

It is not clearly identified how the governing method of AlUla worked before the establishment of the Royal Commission of AlUla. Once the committee was created it is possible to track the governing bodies, although the contributions of each stakeholder is still unclear. However it is safe to say that the administrative changes made on the site have still become more organised and transparent with the administrative changes implemented on the site after 2017.

It is not known how much the locals are involved in the administrative policies. There are an increasing number of research/arts/project grants for locals interested in being involved. Right now a female CEO is the head of the Commission in charge of AlUla. As per interviews, the French government has recently reduced its presence on site, as it was replaced with American and British consultancy firms to accelerate the development process.

## 5.2 Infrastructural Development of the Site

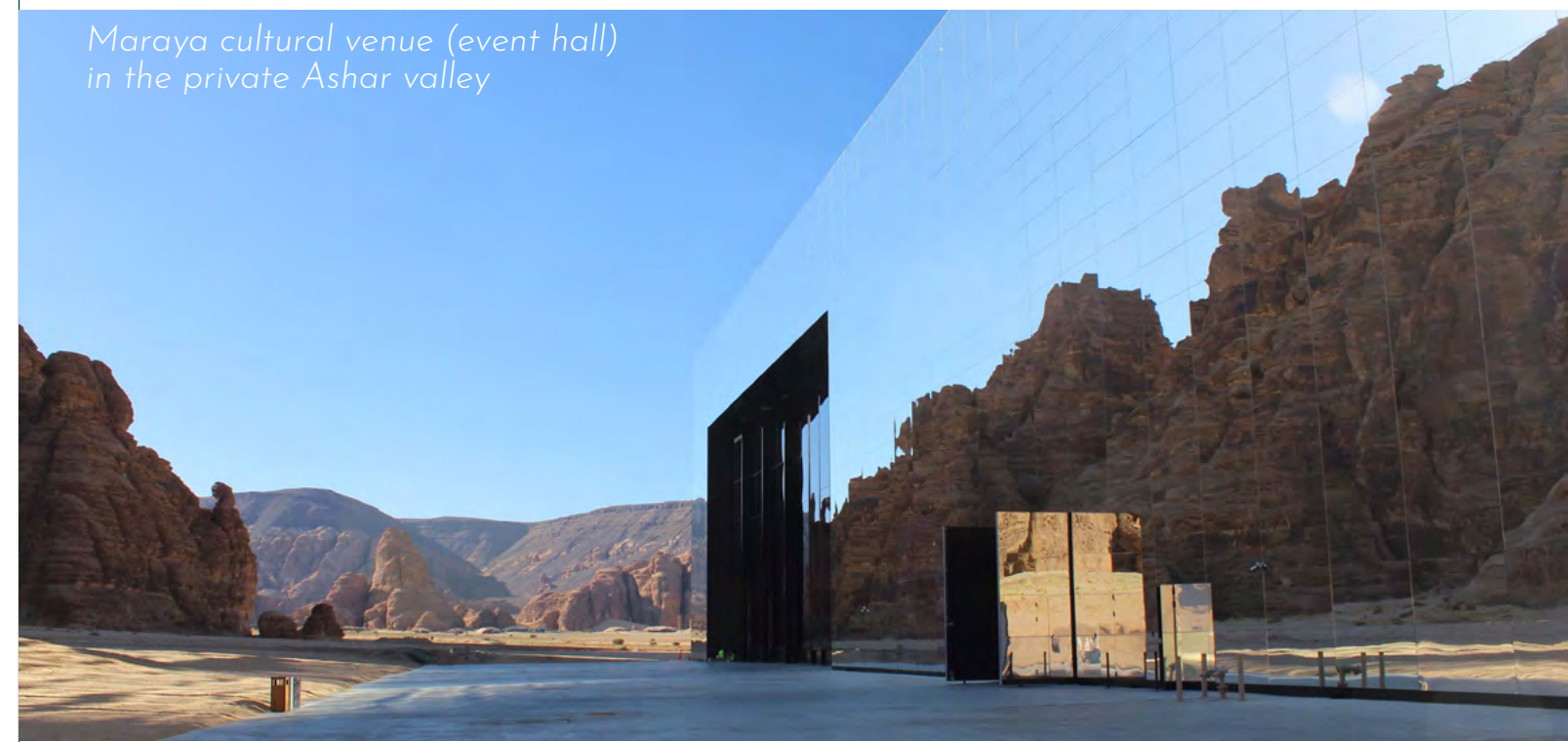
With the establishment of the AlUla vision the infrastructure of the site has improved rapidly in a short period of time. Some of the changes made on the site include:

Expansion of AlUla airport  
Conservation of the Old Town  
Creation of the Ashar Resort  
Design and Construction of Maraya cultural venue  
Incense Road Market

A master-plan published showcases many large scale infrastructural developments of the site. New museum projects including the Hegra Museum and Black Basalt Museum are published. New institutions including the Nabatean theatre and kingdoms institute are being planned. Additionally, 5 new urban districts are planning to be completed by 2035.

All these infrastructural developments are stated to be realized within 12 principles which include sustaining ecosystems and wildlife and building resilience in the area. There is no information on the amount of emissions for construction projects of such large scale

*Maraya cultural venue (event hall)  
in the private Ashar valley*





## 5.3 Academic Interest and Collaborations

There have been countless academic and professional collaborations across many industries. The aim to put the country on the map has pushed the authorities to invite artists, architects, archaeologists from around the world on site. Additionally there were groups of Saudi students sent abroad to study conservation (for example Veneria Reale in Turin). However it is crucial to question how much of the work has been done by locals despite the efforts to increase public participation (see 6.3).

During my visit in November 2024, there was a small exhibition taking place in the Maraya in collaboration with the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. This exhibition was realized specifically to highlight the relationship between the Roman and Nabatean civilisations. It was very interesting to see a depictions of human figures including busts, sculptures and statuettes, which would not have been possible very recently. There are no clear figures on the total amount of collaborations, however AlUla has become a household name in the field of heritage and culture in general.

## 5.4 Destination Development

Under the aim to make Al Ula a world class tourist destination, some of the developments are implemented with commercial motivations. In some cases, these luxury investments overpower the public accessibility, affordability and flexibility to make independent visits.

Multiple new luxury hotels were constructed over the past few years. Many of these resorts are in Ashar Valley, which is a beautiful natural valley surrounded by red volcanic formations. This valley also houses the Maraya, which is a multi-purpose venue, designed by the Italian architecture firm GioForma to host cultural events. This venue and the Ashar Valley is only accessible for reservation or ticket holders to hotels or venues.

Most of the archaeological sites in AlUla are open to the public through pre-booked tours. In places such as the ancient tombs, tourists are not allowed to enter by themselves or leave the tour party. The party includes a “ranger” who is solely responsible to make sure no one is left behind. Hiking in the moun-



tains around cultural heritage sites is also prohibited. It is unknown whether these precautions were taken for the safeguarding of the heritage or for cultural reasons. It has not been reported if the practice will remain this way in the future. However they restrict personal exploration and freedom to spend longer periods of time if needed.

Tours are booked online and come in a variety, most of which are not free. However there is a myriad of luxury options involving Land Rover and helicopter private tours.

Another important remark is the time required before the launch of museum projects. Heritage research, restoration practices, archaeological excavation and curative analysis of museums all take time. In many cases, these long processes were still incomplete. During the visit it was possible to see how recent the excavations had started, and how soon it was to announce a museum project.

## 5.5 Model or Experiment? Existing Models

It is worth noting that calling this fast development practise a model is not entirely accurate. The implementation of these reforms and the quick development plan in both urban and heritage contexts do not reimplement tested and approved models. It is therefore helpful to make comparisons with previous experiments/models of similar kind.

## Dubai as an Experiment

Dubai is a prime example of a similar rapid development experiment. The Emirati city was transformed from a small settlement into a landmark Arabian metropolis under 50 years. Yet the planning and supervision of this growth lacked attention to vernacular urban fabric and architectural heritage. The systematic and continuous shift to Western architecture, the demolition of historic Bastakiya neighbourhood to make space for royal administrative courts and new development plans for the Shindagha palaces caused the loss of much of the traditional heritage.

While there were initiatives starting as early as 1995 to restore the traditional urban fabric, the *modern* city of Dubai overpowered the increasing real estate market. Some built heritage including the souq markets and a reconstruction of the Shindaga neighbourhood is now a testimony how dangerous sudden social and economic developments can be from the heritage perspective.<sup>5</sup>

## Al Balad Historic Neighbourhood as a Model

Al Balad neighbourhood in Jeddah, is one of Saudi Arabia's most well preserved historic neighbourhoods. These high rise residential dwellings showcase beautiful artisanal woodwork in their facade detailing. These houses were occupied by Saudi and immigrant families until the 1950 but then slowly

<sup>5</sup> Ricca, Simone. "Urban Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, the Experiences of Jeddah and Dubai." *Built Heritage* 2, no. 3 (September 2018): 108-22.



turned into rentals for blue collar workers. This transition coincided with the urban expansion the modern city was going through. The preservation plan to preserve the traditional architecture of the neighbourhood was created by a British consultancy firm was drafted in 1979. The plan called for maintaining the residential purpose of the houses however, more than half the total number of houses were lost due to economic concerns. The model continued to develop after 2006, this time aiming to register the neighbourhood as a World Heritage Site. Incorporating the private sector to benefit from this privilege was essential in the continued success of the model.

This example shows the importance of early recognition and planning of built heritage sites. AlBalad truly became one of the unique well-preserved Arab neighbourhoods in the Gulf region. It exemplifies how built heritage should be preserved in parallel with community rehabilitation for a successful long-term living heritage.

Many of the knowledge obtained through the challenges faced in this model such as: land ownership issues, economic concerns and community revival efforts can be transferred in AlUla. Systematic adoption of preventative techniques showcased in Al Balad should be analysed as a model for future projects.





# Evaluation as a Model

# 06

## 6.0 Nation and Identity Building

Overall the launch of the Al Ula vision and multiple other ongoing heritage and destination development projects have demonstrated to the local population their potential to achieve great things under the right circumstances. According to the interviews, the sudden inflow of foreign interest to the Saudi Arabian heritage appears to fill the nation with a sense of national pride.

The hospitality and generosity of the Saudi culture adapts well to the newly born tourism industry. The general public identifies well with as a host country. The conservative communities have accepted the flux of foreign tourists by not publicly objecting to these sudden changes. The new identity is being shaped as a country to visit, whether it is for the natural sites or built heritage.

Whether this method of nation building can be considered as a replicable model is dependent on its future success. The affects of increased nationalism has not yet been tested scientifically as it is too soon to tell. Alhussein (2023) argues that in the case for Saudi Arabia, the nationalism is a means to an end, that is to unite the people through reforms and consolidate power. They delineate that the newly developed nationalism in the country has been successful in managing the religious conservative population through these reforms.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alhussein, Eman. "Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia." ECFR, October 23, 2023. [https://ecfr.eu/publication/saudi\\_first-how-hyper-nationalism-is-transforming-saudi-arabia/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/saudi_first-how-hyper-nationalism-is-transforming-saudi-arabia/).



## 6.1 Top-down Implementation

Counter intuitively, top-down and bottom-up approaches to heritage are still debated in academia<sup>2</sup>. In the case for Al Ula the different sites of built heritage area affected differently from this implementation. Before the intervention by the authorities, the remote ancient sites (including the Lihyanite, Dadanite and Nabatean) were completely abandoned. It can be argued that the top-down introduction of a governing body which would initiate excavations and promote tourism in this area is a good thing.

The old town however, was occupied until the 1980s. In this case it is possible to attempt to revitalise the site by re-establishing community connections. An archive can be created consulting with the prior residents. The success of Matera in Italy can be a good example for the repopulation of this neighbourhood before the sudden initiation of tourism .

In AlUla the chosen methodology appears to enforce economic prosperity over of community revitalisation. The top-down influx of tourism in a site that has never been opened to tourism before can disturb the community members. The top down implementation of new policies aim to create total transformations within a deadline, which may not be productive in a cultural context. Creating a new masterplan aiming to reshape the town, which has not yet been fully excavated can cause issues in long-tem.

<sup>2</sup> Seyhan, Barış, and Antonio Paolo Russo. "Top-down versus Bottom-up Approaches in Heritage Tourism Management and Planning: An Analysis of Contrasting Models Based on Two Turkish Case Studies." *Travel and Tourism: Sustainability, Economics, and Management Issues*, 2020, 267-79.

## 6.2 Public Participation & Remote Communities

Public participation is very important in the conceptualisation of heritage because it ensures cultural sensitivity. In AlUla, the Royal Comission makes all relevant decisions relating to heritage. While this commission is made up of local and international experts, lower class local citizens may be under-represented. Whether their concerns and feedback is taken into account is not clearly defined.

One way the community is being affected by the ongoing changes is the increasing cost of living and rent. As Al Ula is being developed into a global destination, the local farming community is being surrounded by luxury resorts and restaurants. Additionally, the introduction of tourism into these sites bring people from different cultures into the town which may disturb the conservative residents of the area.

The lack of public participation will affect the long term success of this model, since the locals may not embrace the new conceptualization of heritage which has been created for them without their contribution.

"Boardroom"  
by Lulua Alyahya  
Oil on Canvas  
2024



## 6.3 Foreign Involvement and Collaboration

Attraction of talent is one of the points of Vision 2030. Increasing diversity and controlled immigration will contribute in the success of the heritage sector in the future. However, in the field of humanities, there is a common understanding that the work carried out must be performed together with the local communities. This is usually done by field work performed jointly with local and foreign representatives. Sharing the findings of the research with the local people is expected to establish a healthy knowledge-exchange between the parties.

In AlUla, it appears that there is a dependency on foreign agencies to perform the tasks with little participation from local residents. While there are many initiatives to train Saudi citizens abroad in fields of history, archaeology, architecture, surveying and so on, training enough people will take a generation and the deadlines created do not seem to offer that long. Having foreign involvement can cause false interpretation of local values, as seen extensively in the colonial narrative in Egyptology.

The interviews suggest that there isn't enough interest and representation of locals in decision making bodies, but there are more initiatives to increase their number. It is important to clarify the difference between training and doing which must be emphasized for future work.

## 6.4 Gender Perspective

The traditional role of women in Saudi Arabian culture under Sharia law interpretation is very restricted. However the social changes are also influencing the gender roles in society.

Women's rights in Saudi Arabia has been rapidly increasing. Over the past 10 years, legislations were passed to increase female representation in councils, reduce the gender pay gap, grant women the freedom to travel without their guardian's permission, join high ranks in the military, register for divorce or marriage, obtain a driving license and the freedom not to wear abayas if they wish so.

Nevertheless, with many years of living under strict laws and morality police, the Saudi women are often the under-represented group that is now suddenly encouraged to lead the change. The governmental decision to support women in the workforce between 2005-2018, including legislative, educational, social and occupational supports have gradually helped transform the taboos of women as contributors in change.

The Royal Commission of AlUla today is managed by a female CEO. This decision is great to empower women to be more involved. During my visit, there were many female tour guides, operators, welcoming staff and shop owners which suggests that the model had a positive impact on this issue.



## 6.5 Destination Development and Heritage Conservation, Can They Coexist?

Destination development is often a goal for governments to benefit economically. In a site where tourism is unprecedented, the sudden introduction of tourism can affect the conceptualization of heritage negatively. The purpose of heritage is to pass down the set of ideas, skills and the memory authentically and safely down to future generations. Some commercial interests apparent during the site visits were:

- ambition to build many new neighbourhoods
- over-commercialisation of historic sites(eg Incense road)
- categorization of tickets into normal and luxury
- high retail prices including tour tickets and accommodation

In AlUla, fast destination development goals are simultaneously over-commercialising historic sites. This priority given to economic factors will reflect on the public's conceptualising of heritage, where the significance of the monuments and sites will be reduced to their economic meaning.

This conflict of interest can be very dangerous as the economic value can be subject to changes. Should the real estate value outweigh the valuation of the sites, historic areas can be endangered. Additionally, in the scenario where cultural sites are over-commercialised by luxury tours (land rover, helicopter, VIP tours etc.) their target group will be affected and the goal to re-conceptualise them for a new national identity might not be successful.

## 6.6 Public Opinions

In Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to obtain a representative idea of the general public opinion through social media platforms due to restrictions on the country's public image. X (former Twitter) is one of the most popular methods of communication, however for the purposes of this research only sources available in English were used.

Through the interviews carried out and observations on the portion of the public that has participated in the development of Al Ula, it can be deduced that the general public appreciates the new tourism industry, feels a new sense of patriotism and takes pride in joining activities surrounding heritage. It has undoubtedly exponentially increased the amount of job opportunities for locals, yet it has increased the cost of living in Al Ula, which was a very small farming community before the changes.

One common issue raised repeatedly was the resistance of some conservative people to visit the site. It is possible come across people who still believe that Muslims are not permitted in the site, as it is claimed to be cursed by the prophet himself. This obstacle does not stop the authorities from promoting the site as it is regarded as a potential destination for foreign tourists as much as the local ones.

## 6.7 Solutions for Long Term Success

Chances of this model's success is highly dependent on the public acceptance of the new concept of heritage. This will be achieved through the participation of the public in terms of being informed about the ongoing changes, get involved in decision making or contribute to heritage preservation efforts. There can be certain types of measures being taken into account to ensure the continuation of the interest:

- Public education of history and heritage
- Museums
- Training/research institutes
- Cultural centres
- Administrative framework around ownership of tangible heritage
- Festivals and community events
- Grants and sponsorships for empowerment of young people

Resilience appears to be a recurring theme for Saudi Arabia's mission in AlUla. Increasing interest in built heritage by local and foreign enthusiasts can guarantee the continuous development of heritage in the area if done systematically.

In the next steps the top-down changes must become community led. As the new generation is fostered with the growing interest to preservation of built heritage, they will start to play a significant role. The change from within the society is more likely to prove in the long term.



# Oil as Heritage, Resource and Opportunity

# 07

Oil as a last chapter brings an interesting perspective of the country's past, present and future. Oil symbolises the history with the industrial development of the nation. And it certainly plays a key role today, in world that is desperately trying to move away from fossil fuels. The conceptualization of oil in itself today represents the country's intentions for the future.

## 7.0 Heritagization of the Oil Industry

Industrial heritage in Saudi Arabia is surely one that has shaped our world as we know today. The first oil well in Dammam to the commercial quantities of oil found in the area had transformed Saudi Arabia to a major economy and established political unions that impact world economy.

Today "The Oil Industrial Heritage in Saudi Arabia" has been inscribed to the tentative World Heritage List by UNESCO. There are 5 sites making up the bid in the candidacy file. These are:

- 1 Well N° 7, Dammam
- 2 Trans Arab Pipeline (Tapline)
- 3 Jeddah Refinery
- 4 King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM)
- 5 Dhahran Camp

Interestingly this heritage has not been utilised to it full extent yet. These areas are closed to public visitors as they are still operational. It is common to see industrial heritage neglected as a tourist hot spots, however, the potential to

create new narrative for the country's relationship with petroleum can be very significant in rehabilitating cultural heritage and creating a proud nation.

## China's Petroleum Heritage

China is a great example of systematically converting petroleum sites in to heritage sites. The heritage value preserved is not only in the oil wells and fields themselves but jointly "petroleum exploration, development, transportation and processing". Together these practices make a functioning industrial site. Some relevant examples that can also be extrapolated as models are investigating and documenting the transportation and manufacturing process.<sup>1</sup> In Daqing Oil Field Museum it is possible to see how the daily lives

<sup>1</sup> 1. Zhimin Sun, "Analysis of the Systematic Conservation of China's Petroleum Industrial Heritage: A Case Study and Analysis of the Petroleum Industrial

of the inhabitants were affected with the discovery of this natural resource. The Chinese city of Maoming in Guangdong is widely known as the "Oil City in the South". This assumption of collective identity with the extraction of natural resources showcases the amount of influence the operations must have had on the lives of the people of Maoming.

Plans to utilize this heritage were not published among the other mega-projects. There are minor exhibitions in Saudi ARAMCO museum and the national museum in Riyadh about energy obtained from oil. A strong emphasis on the discovery of petrol in the kingdom with detailed explanation of the network of workforce, transport as well as its influence on the daily lives of the people involved must be studied and incorporated into the new national narrative.

## 7.1 Shared Awareness and Departure from Oil Dependency

One major reason why the recognition of oil heritage in Saudi Arabia is so important is the shared awareness of the temporality of the natural resources. The almost overnight expansion of the economy after the discovery of oil, can just as easily diminish overnight. It is important to teach the younger generation about the potential to lose one of the major economic dependencies of the country, to foster dynamic adaptable and more resilient communities.

Heritage in Daqing," *Built Heritage* 7, no. 1 (June 16, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-023-00090-4>.



Cheryl. "Maoming Open-Pit Mine Museum: Time Tunnel through Industrial History." GDToday. Accessed February 2, 2025.



Awareness of the shift from fossil fuels will make the efforts to promote a patriotic ambitious society more easy to achieve. It is important to disseminate the history of oil export in the challenge to build a young generation that thrives to create a diverse economy that takes pride in the heritage but aspires to progress forward.

In 2023 COP summit Saudi Arabia has clearly listed their commitment to the noble goal of stopping climate change. They have also argued that naming specific industries such as fossil fuels is unnecessary. The country's priority appears to be establishing new cities, economies and industries before officially committing to net zero emissions. The construction of these new infrastructures and the embedded carbon it entails is not yet discussed by the officials.

## 7.2 Oil as a Thing of the Past and the New National Narrative

The heritagization of the industrial sites have the advantage of creating a new narrative. A narrative where the industrial sites are open for visitors just like historic wells in Al Ula, or the National Museum of Industrial History in London. A narrative where the tools used in extraction of oil are on display. A narrative where its implications and repercussions discussed. Starting a public debate will encourage critical thinking and maintain Saudi Arabia as a leader in the energy sector.

This transformation with the aim to teach the public the fossil fuels as a thing of the past will effectively accelerate the departure process. Historical narratives relate directly with national identity and the conceptualization of the past by the nation. National achievements widely celebrated in this year's national day celebrations, would surely have more impact if they were done without depending on fossil fuels.

# Conclusion

## 08

### 8.0 Limitations of the Research

One of the main limitations of the research stems from the recent scope covered in the thesis. The lack of systematic archiving or availability of journal articles has made it very difficult to outline the changes.

A major limitation of the research is that only sources available in English (originally or translated) were used despite consulting Arabic speakers at times. The research could have been improved by conducting some of the interviews and data collection methods in Arabic. Additionally, increasing the number of interviews would have helped obtaining more consistent information on the evolution of heritage sites.

Another limitation was that some interviewees were not comfortable speaking despite their right to stay anonymous. This may have refrained the research from obtaining crucial information from the participants, which could have steered the research in a different direction.

### 8.1 Conclusion

Overall the research process was successful in answering the initial thesis questions. The data collection methods proved that there is an apparent re-establishment of the national identity consistent with the newspaper articles collected. The top-down reforms implemented in the country since the launch of the Vision 2030 has led to major developments in many sectors,



eventually influencing the public opinion on heritage. The public understanding of heritage has been shifted massively, from a conservative mindset which did not allow for tangible objects to be celebrated, to recognising built heritage as one of Saudi Arabia's strengths.

While the Saudi customs change, tradition become a tool to handle the winds of change. First, it was found that the timeline of the national narrative expanded. It has been diversified to include a more pluralist perspective on the events that happened. More civilisations, languages and ways of living are discussed in the historical context. This was done while maintaining the emphasis on royal period. Second, success of ambitious heritage projects contributed in the patriotism which is being fostered in the country. "We dream and we achieve" proves every individual's potential to succeed.

It is undeniable the built heritage has been receiving more attention. Whether this attention will return positive outcomes in the long run is difficult to pinpoint. The risks of sudden expansion can be summarised under environmental concerns, public participation, over-commercialisation of the area and cultural sensitivity risks.

Such rapid models of implementation have not always been successful as per the Dubai experiment. Yet the developing sites in Saudi Arabia show potential to put heritage first. The conceptualisation of heritage must be clearly distinguished from real estate and economic ambitions to be protected from similar outcomes.

Another important aspect is to rectify the past mistakes to build a better future. It is important to acknowledge what happened to built heritage sites in the past, to write a complete narrative. Their research and analysis will be vital in painting an accurate picture of the history of built heritage in the kingdom.

Overall, the conceptualisation of heritage upon re-establishing a national identity has been influenced massively. Many changes were made in heritage sites for the started a discussion about how to develop, embrace and manage them. Opening up for tourism, putting women in leadership positions, collaborating with international institutions were big steps to take in a short amount of time. Built heritage in specific has transformed from being neglected to becoming under spotlight as symbols of the new national identity.

# Sitography

## Sitography

Europeana

<https://www.europeana.eu/it>

Royal Commision for AlUla

<https://www.rcu.gov.sa/en/>

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah>

Library of Congress - Main research arm of the U.S. Congress

<https://www.loc.gov>

National Geographic

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/journey-to-alula/timeline/>

# 09



# References

# 10

## Bibliography

- Abd al Ghaffar , Abu Sayyid. Zweite Ansicht der Stadt Mekka über die nordwestliche (rechts) und die südwestliche Seite (links) der Moschee hinaus. 1889. Photograph.
- “About the Author.” Google Books, 2020. [https://books.google.com.sa/books/about/Traditional\\_Built\\_Environment\\_of\\_Saudi\\_A.html?id=GHazQEACAAJ&source=kp\\_author\\_description&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.com.sa/books/about/Traditional_Built_Environment_of_Saudi_A.html?id=GHazQEACAAJ&source=kp_author_description&redir_esc=y).
- “About Us.” Heritage Commission. Accessed February 6, 2025. <https://heritage.moc.gov.sa/en/AboutUs>.
- Abuhjeeleh, Mohammad. “Rethinking tourism in Saudi Arabia: Royal vision 2030 perspective.” *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 8, no. 5 (2019): 1-16.
- Aerial view of Makkah’s Grand Mosque during Ramzan 2024. Saudi Press Agency, April 1, 2024.
- Akıncı, İdil. “Museums as Political Institutions of National Identity Reproduction: Are Gulf States an Exception?” *Middle East Centre*, June 12, 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/24/museums-as-political-institutions-of-national-identity-reproduction-are-gulf-states-an-exception/>.
- Al-Hathloul, Saleh, and Muhammad Aslam Mughal. “Urban Growth Management-the Saudi Experience.” *Habitat International* 28, no. 4 (December 2004): 609–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2003.10.009>.
- “Al-Khorayef Launches ‘Made in Saudi’ Program to Back National Products & Services.” *Saudi Gazette*, March 28, 2021.
- Al-Rasheed, Madawi. *A history of Saudi Arabia* (version 2005). Cambridge.Org. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. [https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/43351/frontmatter/9780521643351\\_frontmatter.pdf](https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/43351/frontmatter/9780521643351_frontmatter.pdf).
- Al-Sarihi, Aisha. “Climate change and economic diversification in Saudi Arabia: Integrity, challenges, and opportunities.” *Policy Paper* 1, no. 2019 (2019): 11-12.
- Al-Tokhais, Abdulelah. “Managing UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia: Contribution and Future Directions.” *Middle East Centre*, June 12, 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/05/11/managing-unesco-world-heritage-sites-in-saudi-arabia-contribution-and-future-directions/>.
- Al-Turaif. DIRIYAH. Accessed December 16, 2024. <https://www.diriyah.sa/en/at-turaif>.
- Alajmi, Sarah Saad. “Traces of Arabia.” Essay. In *Space Wars*, 84–91. National Council for Culture, Art and Letters, State of Kuwait, 2021.
- Alarm over Saudi plan to remove tomb of Prophet Muhammad | middle east eye. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/alarm-over-saudi-plan-remove-tomb-prophet-muhammad>.
- Albqami, Raja. “Economic impact of tourism sector on Saudi Arabian economy.” In *Brussels, International Conference on Input-output and General Equilibrium*, discussion paper (www. ecomod. net/conferences/iioa2004/). 2004.
- Alhussein, Eman. “Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia.” *ECFR*, October 23, 2023. [https://ecfr.eu/publication/saudi\\_first\\_how\\_hyper\\_nationalism\\_is\\_transforming\\_saudi\\_arabia/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia/).

Ali, Anis. "Travel and tourism: growth potentials and contribution to the GDP of Saudi Arabia." *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 16, no. 1 (2018): 417-427.

Almathami, Rafiah, Catheryn Khoo-Lattimore, and Elaine Chiao Yang. "Exploring the Challenges for Women Working in the Event and Festival Sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." *Tourism Recreation Research* 47, no. 1 (October 7, 2020): 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2020.1821329>.

Alobailan, Latifa, and Abeer Alawad. "Architectural Values behind the Formation of Heritage Houses as a Tool for Promoting Cultural Identity in Saudi Arabia." Essay. In *Islamic Heritage Architecture IV*, 29–33. Southampton, UK: WIT press, 2022. <https://books.google.it/books?id=qQCMEAAQBAJ>.

Alrebh, Abdullah F. "A Wahhabi Ethic in Saudi Arabia." *Sociology of Islam* 5, no. 4 (December 5, 2017): 278–302. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00504001>.

Alsubeh, Mahmoud Ali, and Mansour Rifaat Helmi. "Examining the Sustainable Impact of Urban Expansion and Urban Expansion Policies on Archaeological Sites: Evidence from Jordan and Saudi Arabia." *International Journal of Low-Carbon Technologies* 19 (2024): 603–12. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijlct/ctae020>.

Altassan, Abdulrahman. "Sustainability of Heritage Villages through Eco-Tourism Investment (Case Study: Al-Khabra Village, Saudi Arabia)." MDPI, April 25, 2023. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/9/7172>.

"The Alula Region." AFALULA, October 17, 2019. <https://www.afalula.com/en/the-alula-region/>.

"Arabian Peninsula, 2000–1000 B.C.: Chronology: Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Metropolitan Museum of Art." The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Accessed February 5, 2025. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/03/wap.html>.

Bagader, Mohammed Abubaker A. "The Evolution of Built Heritage Conservation Policies in Saudi Arabia between 1970 and 2015: The Case of Historic Jeddah." Research Explorer The University of Manchester, 2016. <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-evolution-of-built-heritage-conservation-policies-in-saudi-ar>.

Bager, Jasmine. "Jeddah's Islamic Arts Biennale to Return under Theme 'And All That Is In-Between.'" Arab News, September 25, 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2572685/lifestyle>.

Baker, Graeme. "Saudi Arabia to Get First Alcohol Shop in More than 70 Years." BBC, January 24, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68085190>.

Bird's eye view of the Old Town of AlUla. n.d. Heritage Conservation Consulting. <https://hcc-heritage.com/en/projects/old-town-alula-architectural-survey-and-conservation-guidelines/>.

Bowen, Wayne H. "The Creation of Saudi Arabia (1902–1932)." Essay. In *The History of Saudi Arabia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008. [https://www.academia.edu/66323743/The\\_History\\_of\\_Saudi\\_Arabia](https://www.academia.edu/66323743/The_History_of_Saudi_Arabia).

Bsheer, Rosie. "Heritage as War." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (October 16, 2017): 729–34. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002074381700068x>.

Camel herders are mounted on camels, as seen here near Hail. 2018. Ilse Koehler Rollefson. <https://www.ilse-koehler-rollefson.com/?p=1224>.

Central Intelligence Agency, November 19, 2024. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/>.

Cheryl. "Maoming Open-Pit Mine Museum: Time Tunnel through Industrial History." GDToday. Accessed February 6, 2025. [https://www.newsgd.com/node\\_99363c4f3b/6d608a8d9c.shtml](https://www.newsgd.com/node_99363c4f3b/6d608a8d9c.shtml).

Chulov, Martin, and Tom Phillips. "Saudi Arabia Declares Public Holiday to Mark World Cup Win over Argentina." *The Guardian*, November 22, 2022.

Clements, F. Saudi Arabia, main regions and cities. Clio press, 1988. [https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/43351/frontmatter/9780521643351\\_frontmatter.pdf](https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/43351/frontmatter/9780521643351_frontmatter.pdf).

Coleman, Madeline. "Saudi Arabia's First Female Racer, Reema Juffali, Charts a Unique Motorsports Path." *The New York Times*, March 8, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5324398/2024/03/08/reema-juffali-f1-academy-saudi-arabia/>.

Dano, Umar Lawal, Ismaila Rimi Abubakar, Faez S. AlShihri, Sayed M.S. Ahmed, Tareq I. Alrawaf, and Maher S. Alshammari. "A Multi-Criteria Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Urban Sustainability in Dammam Metropolitan Area, Saudi Arabia." *Ain Shams Engineering Journal* 14, no. 9 (September 2023): 102062. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asej.2022.102062>.

Dhari ibn Tawala of the Aslam Shammar and his Tribesmen on Horseback. 1918. Photograph. Library of Congress.

Dinler, Mesut. *Building the Heritage: Politics and Historic Preservation in Turkey from the 19th Century to the 1980s*, 2018. [https://iris.polito.it/retrieve/handle/11583/2712265/206912/Thesis\\_MesutDinler.pdf](https://iris.polito.it/retrieve/handle/11583/2712265/206912/Thesis_MesutDinler.pdf).

Dinler, Mesut. *Modernization through past: Cultural Heritage during the late-ottoman and the early-republican period in Turkey*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2019.

Diriyah mud-brick city during Founding Day celebrations. February 16, 2024. Fact Magazine.

Douet, James. "The Heritage of the Oil Industry." *The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage*, 2020. <https://doi.org/https://ticcih.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Oil-industry-thematic-report.pdf>.

Doumato, Eleanor A. "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 1992): 31–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530199208705547>.

Eisenstadt, S. N. *Multiple modernities*, January 1, 2000. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/20027613?refreqid=fastly-default>.

El-Bastawisy, Magdy. "Environmental Influence on the Built Heritage, Saudi Arabia Regions." *Rendiconti Lincei. Scienze Fisiche e Naturali* 35, no. 1 (February 17, 2024): 237–52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12210-024-01223-2>.

El-Bastawisy, Magdy. "Environmental Influence on the Built Heritage, Saudi Arabia Regions." *Rendiconti Lincei. Scienze Fisiche e Naturali* 35, no. 1 (February 17, 2024): 237–52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12210-024-01223-2>.

Exell, Karen, and Trinidad Rico. *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula*, April 22, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315575285>.



Farhat, Shazia. "Exploring the Perspectives of the Saudi State's Destruction of Holy Sites: Justifications and Motivations." Thesis, Harvard University Library, 2018.

Gardner, Frank. "Saudi Arabia to Open up to Foreign Tourists with New Visas," September 27, 2019.

Goodfellow, Melanie. "Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Film Festival Launches Defining First Edition." Screen Daily, December 6, 2021. <https://www.screendaily.com/news/saudi-arabias-red-sea-film-festival-launches-defining-first-edition/5165740.article>.

Gritten, David. "First Arab Female Astronaut Reaches Space Station." BBC, May 22, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65671485>.

Haddad, Mohammed. "See How Mecca Has Changed over the Past 100 Years." See how Mecca has changed over the past 100 years | Al Jazeera English, July 15, 2021. <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2021/hajj-mecca-changed-100-years/index.html>.

Hewgill, Christian. "Saudi Arabia Grand Prix: A Race for Equal Rights." BBC, December 4, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-59220247>.

"The History of Saudi's Trade Routes." Explore Saudi Arabia. Accessed February 6, 2025. <https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/stories/the-history-of-saudi-s-trade-routes>.

Ibn Humudh, Mohammed. "The Role of the Local Community Participation in the Management of Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Rijal Almaa and Historic Example in Rural Saudi Arabia." Thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2022.

"Information Document Glossary of World Heritage Terms." A Glossary of Terms relating to the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, June 1996. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/gloss96.htm>.

The invention of tradition, March 26, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107295636>.

Jambi, Rahaf. "Riyadh Fashion Week Celebrates Saudi Creativity and Heritage Previous." Arab News, October 19, 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2575901/lifestyle>.

Jamel, Lamia. "The relation between tourism and economic growth: A case of Saudi Arabia as an emerging tourism destination." Virtual Economics 3, no. 4 (2020): 29-47.

"Journey through Time." National Geographic. Accessed February 5, 2025. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/journey-to-alula/timeline/>.

Jpatokal. AlBalad Coral Houses. February 29, 2008. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AlBalad\\_CoralHouses.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AlBalad_CoralHouses.JPG).

Kinninmont, Jane. "Saudi Arabia: Why Is Going to the Cinema Suddenly OK?" BBC, April 17, 2018.

Kursk, Olivier Bois von. "Transitioning Away from Oil and Gas." International Institute for Sustainable Development, May 14, 2024. <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2024-05/transitioning-away-from-oil-gas.pdf>.

Linnhoff, Josef Sebastian. "'associating' with God in Islamic Thought: A Comparative Study of Muslim Interpretations of Shirk." "Associating" with God in Islamic thought: a comparative study of Muslim interpretations of shirk, June 29, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/236>.

Mazzetto, Silvia. "Heritage Conservation and Reuses to Promote Sustainable Growth." Materials Today: Proceedings 85 (2023): 100–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.matpr.2023.05.269>.

Mazzetto, Silvia. "Heritage Restoration as a Tool to Promote Architectural Identity in the Gulf Regions." Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture 47, no. 1 (April 25, 2018): 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pdte-2017-0015>.

Mazzetto, Silvia. "Sustainable Heritage Preservation to Improve the Tourism Offer in Saudi Arabia." Urban Planning 7, no. 4 (September 6, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v7i4.5777>.

Mescid-i Haram (Kabe), Mekke - Masjid Al-Haram in Mecca. Photograph. SALT Research, n.d. SALT Research.

Metz, Helen Chapin. Saudi Arabia: A country study. Washington, D.C: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O, 1993. [https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz\\_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz\\_0.pdf](https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0.pdf)

Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia. "Saudi Arabia's Achievement of Welcoming +100 Million Tourists Receives Global Recognition from UN Tourism and WTTC." Ministry of Tourism Saudi Arabia, February 29, 2024. <https://mt.gov.sa/about/media-center/news/171/Saudi-Arabia's-achievement-of-welcoming-100-million+-tourists-is-globally-applauded-by-UN-Tourism-and-WTTC>.

Moll, Herman, John Bowles, and Thomas Bowles. "Arabia Agreeable to Modern History." Map. Library of Congress. London: Printed by T. Bowles & J. Bowles, 1715. [https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl\\_17579/?r=-0.033,0.112,1.111,0.913,0](https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_17579/?r=-0.033,0.112,1.111,0.913,0).

Nabatean tombs illuminated with the Saudi Arabian coat of arms and flag on Founding Day. Experience Al Ula. Accessed December 28, 2024. <https://www.experiencealula.com/en/plan-your-trip/public-holidays>.

Naseem, Sana. "The role of tourism in economic growth: Empirical evidence from Saudi Arabia." Economies 9, no. 3 (2021): 117.

New Museums Campaign Focuses on Saudi Heritage, November 18, 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2579773/saudi-arabia>.

Nugali, Noor. "Saudi Arabia to Celebrate Founding Day on Feb. 22 Every Year, Says Decree." Arab News, January 27, 2022.

Official map of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. GEOSA. General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information, October 8, 2024. <https://www.geoportal.sa/portal/apps/sites/#!/nsdi-ar/documents/e9ff1183725f47758d689cc3db7ad4c5/about>.

"The Oil Industrial Heritage in Saudi Arabia." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed May 26, 2024. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6639/>.

"The Perils of Saudi Nationalism." London School of Economics and Political Science. Accessed May 3, 2024. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2024/02/202402051830/nationalism>.

Photo of the Chedi Hegra. n.d. Experience Al Ula. <https://www.experiencealula.com/en/plan-your-trip/accommodation/the-chedi-hegra>.

Pigot, Thierry. "A Monumental Lihyanite Statue from Saudi Arabia Deposited from the Royal

- Commission for Alula (RCU) to the Musée Du Louvre.” AFALULA, September 6, 2022. <https://www.afalula.com/en/a-monumental-lihyanite-statue-from-saudi-arabia-deposited-from-the-royal-commission-for-alula-rcu-to-the-musee-du-louvre/>.
- Power, Carla. “Saudi Arabia Bulldozes over Its Heritage.” *Time*, November 14, 2014. <https://time.com/3584585/saudi-arabia-bulldozes-over-its-heritage/>.
- Ramadan, Rasha H., Mona S. Ramadan, Ibtesam I. Alkadi, Haya M. Alogayell, Ismail Y. Ismail, and Nesren Khairy. “Assessment of Sustainable World Heritage Areas in Saudi Arabia Based on Climate Change Impacts on Vulnerability Using RS and GIS.” *Sustainability* 14, no. 23 (November 28, 2022): 15831. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142315831>.
- Rcu. “About RCU.” About the Royal Commission for AlUla. Accessed November 4, 2024. <https://www.rcu.gov.sa/en/about-rcu>.
- Rcu. “Geology of Alula.” Geology of AlUla | The Royal Commission for AlUla. Accessed December 31, 2024. <https://www.rcu.gov.sa/en/about-rcu/geology-of-alula>.
- “Residents’ Emotional Responses to Tourism Development in Saudi Arabia.” *Tourism Review*. Accessed November 21, 2024. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/tr-10-2021-0457/full/html>.
- Ricca, Simone. “Urban Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, the Experiences of Jeddah and Dubai.” *Built Heritage* 2, no. 3 (September 2018): 108–22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/bf03545713>.
- Rise and fall of the Saudi Religious Police | Arab News. Accessed July 29, 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1558176/saudi-arabia>.
- “The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia.” Law of Printing and Publication | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Accessed February 5, 2025. <https://www.saudiembassy.net/law-printing-and-publication#General%20Provisions>.
- Sanadgol Ghalenoei, Mostafa. “A Study on the Shark Difference between the Views of Muhammad Bin Abdulwahhab and Shia and Sunni Scholars on Visiting the Saint Graves.” *Seraj-e Monir*, 2021.
- Saudi Arabia Commits to Net Zero Emissions by 2060, October 23, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58955584>.
- “Saudi Arabia Driving Ban on Women to Be Lifted,” September 27, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41408195>.
- “Saudi Arabia Profile - Timeline.” BBC News, October 4, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703523>.
- “Saudi Arabia Set for Inauguration of World’s Tallest Flagpole.” *Alarabiya News*, September 21, 2014. <https://english.alarabiya.net/variety/2014/09/21/All-set-for-Saudi-Arabia-s-inauguration-of-world-s-biggest-flag>.
- Saudi Arabia takes first step towards relaxing alcohol laws - economist Intelligence Unit. Accessed November 22, 2024. <https://www.eiu.com/n/saudi-arabia-takes-first-step-towards-relaxing-alcohol-laws/>.
- “Saudi Arabia to Celebrate Flag Day on March 11 of Each Year.” *Arab News*, March 1, 2023. <https://arab.news/85dkg>.
- “Saudi Arabia Unveils New Identity for 93rd National Day: ‘We Dream and We Achieve.’” *Saudi Gazette*, August 3, 2023.
- Saudi Arabia: 28,000 Women Apply for 30 Train Driver Jobs, February 17, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-60414143>.
- “Saudi Arabia’s Women Vote in Election for First Time.” BBC, December 12, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35075702>.
- Saudi commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH). Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.scega.gov.sa/en/pages/aboutscta.aspx>.
- Saudi Foundation Day celebrations in Historic City of Jeddah. November 19, 2024. Regency Holidays.
- “Saudi Government Demolishes Historic Ottoman Castle.” *World Socialist Web Site*. Accessed November 22, 2024. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2002/01/fort-j28.html>.
- “Saudi National Day 94.” General Entertainment Authority. Accessed February 6, 2025. <https://nd.gea.gov.sa/index-en.html#IdentityFiles>.
- “Saudi Tourism Authority to Begin Riyadh’s National Museum Expansion Project.” *Arab News*, June 12, 2018. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1320481/saudi-arabia>.
- “Saudi Women Should Not Have to Wear Abaya Robes, Top Cleric Says.” BBC, February 10, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43017148>.
- “Saudi-Initiated ‘Arab Week at UNESCO’ to Kick off in November.” *Saudi Gazette*, October 24, 2024.
- SaudiPedia. “Al-Ula Development Timeline.” *Saudipedia*, October 9, 2024. <https://saudipedia.com/en/article/2694/economy-and-business/projects/al-ula-development-timeline>.
- Scott, G. “Cultural Heritage and the Petroleum Industry.” *The APPEA Journal* 46, no. 1 (2006): 611. <https://doi.org/10.1071/aj05042>.
- Sell, Brando. “The Archaeology of Power: Saudi Arabia and Heritage Destruction in the Middle East.” *The Cornell Diplomat*, 2024. <https://journals.library.cornell.edu/index.php/tcd/article/view/722>.
- Seyhan, Barış, and Antonio Paolo Russo. “Top-down versus Bottom-up Approaches in Heritage Tourism Management and Planning: An Analysis of Contrasting Models Based on Two Turkish Case Studies.” *Travel and Tourism: Sustainability, Economics, and Management Issues*, 2020, 267–79. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7068-6\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7068-6_17).
- Shamsuddin, Salahuddin Mohd., and Siti Sara Binti Hj. Ahmad. “Kingdoms and States of Arabian Peninsula before Islam.” *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)* 4, no. 6 (2020): 63–76. <https://www.ajhssr.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/120466376.pdf>.
- Stenslie, Stig. *Regime stability in Saudi Arabia the challenge of Succession*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Sun, Zhimin. “Analysis of the Systematic Conservation of China’s Petroleum Industrial Heritage: A Case Study and Analysis of the Petroleum Industrial Heritage in Daqing.” *Built Heritage* 7, no. 1 (June 16, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-023-00090-4>.
- “A Thriving Economy.” *Vision 2030*, 2024. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/vision-2030/>



overview/a-thriving-economy/.

Usher, Sebastian. "First Saudi-Penned Opera Opens in Riyadh." BBC, April 26, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68903890>.

Van Roosmalen, Pauline. "Changing Views on Colonial Heritage." Identification and Documentation of Modern Heritage, UNESCO-World Heritage Centre, Paris, 2003, 122–28.

"Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." Riyadh: The government of Saudi Arabia, April 25, 2016.

"Welcome to Moc Homepage." Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.moc.gov.sa/en>.

# Appendix

# 11

## Interview 1

Anonymous person who has worked on site in AlUla. The interviewee has refused to share their personal information. They have replied to a set of structured open ended questions on text and later in person.

## Notes from the Interview

### BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

**1.Name (or initials):** Anonymous

**2.Place of birth:** \*\*\*

**3.Occupation (or general sector):** Architect / Museum and Heritage Expert

**4.Highest Education Level:** Degree in Architecture

### EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

**5.How long have you been working in Al Ula? Can you indicate the time frame?** Two/half Year

**6.In which other middle eastern countries have you resided in previously?** Egypt

**7.Since when have you been aware of Al-Ula (before or after Vision 2030)? Did your expectations before you went meet what you have seen?** 2018. Yes and not of course!

**8.Can you compare your perception of KSA before and after your visit?** Deeply different positioning between the perception based in narratives and indirect information and the evidence of the daily life mixed with the perception of the reality .

### PARTICIPATION

**9.How did you first get involved in the development of Al-Ula?** I was directly offered a position in my field of expertise (museum and heritage project development )

**What is your role in the project?** Development and Design Management for museum, art and heritage projects

**10.Who do you collaborate with on a daily basis? (locals/researchers/universities/government entities).** Internal (within my organization) and external stakeholders (architects, engineers, artists, curators, specialist, researchers, universities, public KSA entities, etc )

**11.How much role do you think the locals play in the project (in your sector)?** This is a critical question that needs deeply rooted considerations and informations .

**12.Do you think it is easily facilitated for the locals to participate in the ongoing cultural activities in the site?** It depends.

**13.How is the reaction from the locals towards collaboration with Italian and French professionals?** Italians are more suitable of being integrated than the Frenchs. Cultural matters but also language matters. And the Saudi educations is in general American/Brithish based that make the difference very strong with the usual French education and approach. Italians are more free, out of the box and adaptable on the situation.

**14.Do you think the local tribes have a say in the future of Al Ula, or do you perceive the changes to be top-down?** This is a critical question that needs deeply rooted considerations and informations .

**15.Has the recent developments has had any negative impact on the local traditions/cultures?** Again, This is a critical question that needs deeply rooted considerations and informations . But I cans say that generally positive impacts are present. Negative impacts are also evidents.

### NATIONAL IDENTITY

**16.In your opinion do the changes being made on the site represent the wishes of the locals? Have you experienced any criticism from the local population?** AlUla it is first of all a farming village - a very beautiful place among other things - of feudal style with landowners and farmers. I don't think any of them were remotely interested in things like museums and contemporary art, and I'm sure that even now only a very few have developed an embryonic interest. In Italy I know a similar scenario: the case of Gibellina Nuova in Sicily (you can investigate) .

**17.Can you walk me through the development of heritage as a concept in Saudi Arabia? What changes have you witnessed through the years?** This is a complex, complicated and critical question that needs deeply rooted considerations and informations .

**18.Do you think museums in Saudi Arabia have contributed to this change?** At the present moment the idea of Museum in KSA is still unclear and not really available with extremely limited future exceptions.

**19.How much do you think local citizens in KSA embrace cultural development?** This is a complex, complicated and critical question that needs deeply rooted considerations and informations. Can be related deeply different consideration if you start considering the society as still layered, the social level. The education level, the regions, the cities the villages.

**20. As a European, how do you think Saudi Arabia as a nation is perceived in Europe?** In Europe we are the good one and they think that



Saudis are the bad ones, like the Italians think of the Frenchs as example or the people of Milano of the Sicilians. Of course they presume in Europe too having enough information to judge, but this is what they oare convinced of and of course in wrong way, based on the incomplete, wrong, culpably wrong, distorsive. I don't mention specifically the guy of the corner of the street but also highly positioned professionals and stakeholders. Bu of course I talk in this way because I live and work here, in high level, from almost 5 years.

**21.Do the ongoing cultural changes make a difference in this perception?** Yes, probably in a short time-scale of 5/6 years.

Closing Questions

**22.In your opinion would you consider the recent changes in the site as a national role model?** Site? Alula? No

**23.In your opinion, are there any other initiatives to be considered for the development of the Saudi nation?** Of course yes, and I don't make stupid reference to the opening of the use of alcohollic drinks.

**24.Is there anything you would like to add that is important for me to understand the development of the nation and the site?** That's a long answer!

## Interview 2

This interview was carried out in person.

**When you visited Mada'in Saleh (I think you mentioned it was 2013), was there a ticketing office or security? Or any info points/signs/maps?**

One of my team guys had a contact who knew a guide so we met up with him. I cross checked it with the hotel and he met us and showed us around. There were no entry gates or ticketing or indeed any signs or maps.

**Just to confirm was it in 2013?**

Yes 2012/13. We stayed at a hotel in the East of the town and visited the main areas and toured around in our own vehicles. Literally parking outside of the tombs and the old railway station.

On the way back we visited the Old town that was being renovated and walked around the ruins until the police asked us to leave. It wasn't long after a French expat had been robbed and killed there so I guess they were still a little jumpy.

We spoke to a couple of Syrian archaeologists who were working on the Laurence of Arabia train station and they mentioned the amount of investment the Saudis had poured in to secure the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**That's so interesting because when I visited I got the feeling that the Ottoman sites were a little neglected**

A little selective direction there I can only assume. The entire place was full of wind-blown rubbish which they kept saying they will clean up.

## Interview 5

The semi structured interview was carried out on Zoom platform.

### Notes from the Interview

*A private sector professional in Saudi Arabia with family ties to the region under discussion.*

- The interviewee was born in 1989 in Yanbu, a coastal town in Saudi Arabia, where their father worked at the time.
- Both parents are originally from the region under study.
- Identifies as male and works as an account representative in the private sector.
- Holds a bachelor's degree in engineering.
- Has extensive knowledge of the area through these visits and family connections.

- In the past, higher education institutions were mainly located in larger cities like Jeddah and Riyadh.
- The interviewee's father attended university in Riyadh, while their mother studied in Medina.
- Infrastructure in the region was limited in previous decades, which influenced career and educational choices for locals.

- First visited the historic site of Madain Saleh at around 13-14 years old.
- Previously, tourism was informal, with visitors using personal vehicles to access historical sites.
- Recently, guided tours, structured visits, and enhanced infrastructure have transformed tourism.
- Has also visited the mountain site of Jabal Ikma, which features ancient inscriptions.

- The recent development aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, focusing on diversifying the economy and promoting historical tourism.
- Historically, the country prioritized religious tourism, but recent efforts aim to showcase archaeological and cultural sites.
- Infrastructure improvements include enhanced road networks, airport expansions, and new accommodations.
- Local residents are given priority in job creation, training programs, and scholarships for studying abroad.

- The local population has been largely supportive of the changes, allowing development to proceed without opposition.
- Foreign expertise has played a crucial role in archaeological research, tourism management, and site conservation.
- Collaboration between Saudi and international universities contributes to research efforts.

- Increased tourism has led to rising housing costs and higher rents, impacting affordability for locals.
- Luxury accommodations and high-end restaurants cater to wealthier visitors, but budget-friendly options remain available.
- The economic impact includes new business opportunities, job creation, and cultural exchange.

- The area is now more accessible due to improved road conditions and airport upgrades, allowing for direct international flights.
- The shift from personal vehicle travel to organized tours has enhanced visitor experiences.

- Local traditions and cultural identity remain strong despite increased tourism.
- While foreign tourists are more visible, the local way of life continues with minimal disruption.
- Some concerns include traffic congestion and housing shortages due to rising demand.

- The interviewee views the development positively, believing it has enhanced economic opportunities and cultural recognition.
- They support future involvement in the region's growth, whether through tourism, conservation, or business ventures.
- The recent changes serve as a model for similar future projects in Saudi

Arabia.



## Interview 6

The semi-structures interview was carried out on zoom platform.

### Notes from the Interview

**The first few questions are under the topic of the vision 2030 and the recent developments and reforms. And of course this terminology if there's anything you don't agree with like reforms or the benefits and risks you can let me know. I will fix the questions because it was difficult phrasing the questions as well for me. So what do you think are the moderate effects of modernization efforts to the authentic features of national culture? Do you think there are any benefits to it of this fast development that the country is going through, or is it more risky how would you say**

I don't quite call it modernisation I think I'm going to call it revival or going back in the 1970s where the culture was very open. So that's the situation now I mean there's a culture. Because of the 1970s and 60s where Saudi was pretty open. There were cinemas, there was music, there were people who had the option and interests of whatever they wanted without heavy restrictions as long as they respect the Islamic teachings and personal matters, but nothing pretty strict or conservative matter.

**Yes I definitely understand actually yesterday me and my supervisor for the thesis we had a whole discussion about what is modernisation and how it's more a western term to define the changes that were happening in the 18 to 20th century Europe and that it's not directly applicable elsewhere so I do agree that modernization is not the right term to use.**

Yeah it's not the current situation it's not for the relation process no. It's just going back to the yes and I feel yes go back 60s and 70s

**Do you think that the implementation of these reforms will redefine a new national identity or do you think a change in national identity is unavoidable either way?**

Oh no there is no change in the national identity because as I said the 1970s and 60s Saudi Arabia was Saudi Arabia. It was a country that had a society and culture that's aligned with the sort of teachings and values so that I define the vision 2030 is most stressing of the identity of the Saudis. This is presented in so many things, the pillars of the vision itself which is and I think most of the things happening in Saudi Arabia revolve around the cultural heritage and so the heritage, I don't wanna say is the new face of Saudi Arabia because heritage was pre-existing long time ago but they now emphasize on the heritage. The vision 2030 it uses the heritage to the world. So I think this is the new face of Saudi Arabia internation-

ally. That Saudi Arabia is very rich with heritage, very rich with culture that the world should really pay attention to it and learn from it.

**Again we can rephrase it. Maybe it's not a new national identity but maybe it's a more reinforced patriotic approach. Because it seems like it aims to diversify the economy and also foster a new generation that's very skilful and proud.**

Exactly, exactly.

**OK thank you and the next question is what is the conceptualization of heritage in Saudi Arabia. So what are the changes that you witnessed through the years from my readings it is not very linear this process this evolution of what is heritage. It is not the same anywhere in the world. So it's might be a little bit of a difficult question, the concept of heritage.**

OK with the vision 2030 the main difference, from my point view, as a scholar of this subject for so many decades it's the activation of this heritage. In the past before vision 2030 the heritage was there but it was not activated. So there is no use of it why update an historic building without activating it, without allowing people to come feel it and live in it. There is no value in this sense. But now the situation is distinctly different. Now they activated it, activation is more important than restoration. Because when it comes to activation, when you activate a historic building it will automatically restore. So activation is the most important for heritage revival. Now everyone knows about alula and historic Jeddah AlBalad, Assir, Diriyah and so on.

**Thank you so much for bringing that up also in Italy we learned the exactly the same thing. That saving an abandoned building is the most difficult thing because the constant maintenance required will never be fulfilled unless there is inhabitants in it. So I definitely agree with you in that. But how would you say this change in the concept, the new steps towards activation being taken would you say its only to do with vision 2030 or the locals have participated and there was a common understanding for a need for a change. How would did you find how this came to be**

Okay, Saudi Arabia unlike other countries is very rich with community heritage, the buildings were built by the people themselves, not by the state. So with time people with the modernisation process that went in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and the oil discovery and people have started to move to temporary concrete buildings. And the architecture buildings so they abandoned their original heritage homes, because they thought the new ones are a great environment, very shameful to stay in and they should move to something very contemporary, something up to standard of that time, so these buildings were abandoned and with the vision 2030 there are several organisations like SCTA they maintained these houses. But these were built by people themselves so they could serve privately in buildings. So the main-

tenance was very limited .

Now with vision 2030 things are happening with masterplan of the old town of alula or the villages in Assir, Riyadh or other regions and the start of the government story and the state heritage like the palaces they have been exhibited in London. The country is open for other people to come without even visa restrictions. Tourists started to come from all over the world, the communities realised that those international visitors are coming to enjoy the experience and then the community itself have started to restore their buildings. That was a pretty successful outcome of the vision 2030. Because in the past people said people said that here are our houses, if anyone should to take care of these houses that's not us it's the government. Its actually not the government it's the people themselves. Its not the SA government that's appreciating the heritage its also the entire world. And I visited al balad a long time ago last year and I saw so many European visitors that came in a cruise and there were hundreds in the streets. I asked the shopkeepers and the people living there if they are happy to see this are you making money out of this and they said its excellent. And some of the traditional houses' owners converted their houses into coffee shops, restaurants and saw on. That kind of direction did not exist.

**Thank you for bringing that up also when you were explaining I was thinking it's maybe comparable case study would be Matera in Italy where again a very traditional housing where abandoned because back in the days people were living together with their animals as a farming community. But when modernization hits all the houses were abandoned people felt shameful of their traditional housing until it was rediscovered by UNESCO and the Italian authorities. People were reoccupying the space so it could be a very interesting comparison as a case study for me too thank you. Talking about Al ula now, you visited the site multiple times before the vision 2030 changes were implemented on the site. How were the changes in your observations. How was it the first time you visited and how did it progress over the years?**

Okay I started to deal with alula a long time ago. I was there when I was a student in 1979 I think. My university took us on a tour in alula. Surveying and to see whats happening there. It was a fenced area at that time. Nobody could enter without an authorised permission for Madain Salih, the Nabatean remains. That time alula the old town was almost empty. I think we got the chance to meet the last people who were about to leave the town to new alula, to the western alula we really were impressed with the architecture there and the philosophy behind the urban planning of alula. The alula was this located in desert area far away from all Islamic cities like Damascus cairo Istanbul. So they created an urban planning very protected and secure for the people themselves for the unhabitants.

Then later on I went back in 2008 with colleagues from technical university of Vienna at that time the town was completely abandoned in ruins. Then after 5 years in 2013 I turned back with a great approach by relevant au-

thorities to restore some parts of alula. Just the restaints with the facades of buildings. And that was okay but again the culture was not exposed. Nobody from Germany brazil Italy could visit the country and come to alula. So again okay you restore it but whats next? So it was deserted again with no activation or events or nothing. In 2017 or 18 I think, things started to change in alula with strategic plans to activate alula. Because some consultants noticed that alula the old town is very demolished and it may be too late to restore it. So they concentrated in the Nabatean ruins and madain saleih and left the old town. You know alula has two types of heritage:

the ancient buildings from more than 2000 years ago that were constructed by the Nabatean, their capital was Petra in Jordan. That the ancient part with the ancient rocks and graves and saw on and we have the traditional architecture that was built by people and still inhabited until recent times. That the old town of alula where buildings with mud materials were built

So in the 2017 the concentration was in ancient alula in madain salih. Not the town itself. And for me because I was specialised in traditional architecture I was really disappointed. I thought the first thing they should have done was to restore the old town. But that did not happen. Because I talked with al ula in 2013 I taught a design studio with graduate students, we decided to set u a masterplan for a heritage resort in alula. We talked a few cluster and collected them with each other so international visitors and locals can come an enjoy an experience in alula. Then I got a chance to meet some people and tell them that design studio we did. That's before the book I wrote about alula unearthed. So as I said things started to change.

They brought people from Egypt who had experience with restoring mud buildings. The process of restoration went through now there is a wonderful resort. There were Saudi students who were studying landscape architecture and urban design in the UK and Australia and they emailed me and said that their thesis about alula is missing maps drawing. .... I would really like you to check the map and the plans of the buildings we reused. This will help you to understand the strong quotation of alula in terms of providing it and bringing the people back to it. After all you cannot just restore a historic site/traditional site and convert it to hotels and souvenir shop etc. No, you have to bring people living there. That would be the living heritage. If there are no tenants no people living there its just like a museum. It will be a ghost place at night. Until now idk if you hear about albalad. Jeddah?

**Yes I actually lived in Jeddah so I visited al balad multiple times.**

is still alive , it's probably one of the only living traditional heritage in Saudi arabia. People are still living there they are still use the shops, their mosques and schools. That's the success about retaining and activating their heritage sites, to bring people to make up these sites. Not just to see it. What was it like reviving the community there? The community culture, the events the arts and crafts the agriculture.



When you activate it right like Al Balad. The economy of the place changes. People are not going outside making money outside etc. Now they are focusing on the area itself. They still work in the shops and saw on . and some of the functions of the shops have changed. For example instead of having a tailor you'll have fewer tailors and the rest some souvenir shops handcrafts shops café shops or restaurants. There is a change in the type of work of the inhabitants because of the activation they started to focus concentrator their work activities and business in this kind of activation parts.

**And my next question is about this relationship between the locals and residents of alula and the Nabatean civilisation. What's I know that previously it was seen as a cursed town that it was Muslims were not allowed to go there. How was this relationship rehabilitated?**

Well I think in the past because the site there were some mistakenly perceived, yes the prophet says you should pass by the punishment area very quickly. This does not mean to ignore or desert this kind of area. I think people should pass by it and contemplate and learn from it. Not to ignore them no. And that was what the vision 2030 brought to Madain salih. It's becoming a very popular area for the Muslims for them to go and learn to contemplate. There was a punishment but mostly the visitors of madain saleh now they don't go and check the punishment. They just go and check how the other communities like the Nabataean were very skillful in digging these wonderful graves. And think imagining how these people and communities lived in these buildings. How these graves and cemeteries were placed. So now this is the status of the madain salih. For alula the relationship between the two sites in history madain salih was there alula was there from my studies. The people of Alula learnt from the ancient site of madain salih water generation systems from the ground and preservation technique. Anqura is an old settlement found by the nabateans so they and also they took some stones from the Nabatean sites and used them in construction of their housing. The mud houses of alula you have the lower half lower floor built out of stones and the top from mud. And that was the practical relationship between ht eppl sof alula the more recent site and the ancient site of Nabataean civilisation.

**I was going to ask another question about the public participation during these changes. Of course the old town was abandoned**

In the 1980 s when the modernised construction materials planning systems the great patterns and networks were introduced people abandoned their original settlements the same for alula. So we have the new alula which you'll see like any middle eastern town. Its very modern trees cars concrete buildings roads markings so they abandoned their town. So now they are back because of the activations efforts. They working on the old town of alula and the resort souvenir shops and there is a historic road called the silk road the ancient one they have a part of it that passes by alula. Nowadays you will see a lot of cultural shops restaurants and activities along that part of the silk road. So people of alula are living in concrete buildings driving cars and working in this historic part. This is also bringing

the people back to their heritage.

**What is like in Saudi edu system how much is taught about this evolution that alula has gone through?does it have now a permanent place because if I was a student in Saudi arabia now I would love to be informed about this so what do you think is the relationship between the education system and sites ancient origins but also up to the 1980s time.**

.....it became about the whole country.....But for other universities in SA dealing with heritage depends on faculty members the research interest, some years ago everybody started to go with the plan with sustainable architecture or smart architecture. So it varies. I visited the town a very historic town, in SA last week. And I was a bit surprised that the local university never visited that site. The current residents told me that they never saw any students or faculty of the university. But I really hope that other towns and other universities in Saudi Arabia follow the same approach a in terms of dealing with heritage. It is very important and in fact last year I was invited by a UNESCO organisation that deals with heritage in high degradation for meeting. They wanted me to talk about my experience teaching at the university. Because the situation is not only in Saudi Arabia but also in many countries which are rich in heritage and traditional architecture, but the universities are not focused on the treasures that they have. So they work in different subjects. But you know the new generation will realise especially in other towns heritage is the real face of Saudi Arabia. Its not oil, its heritage.

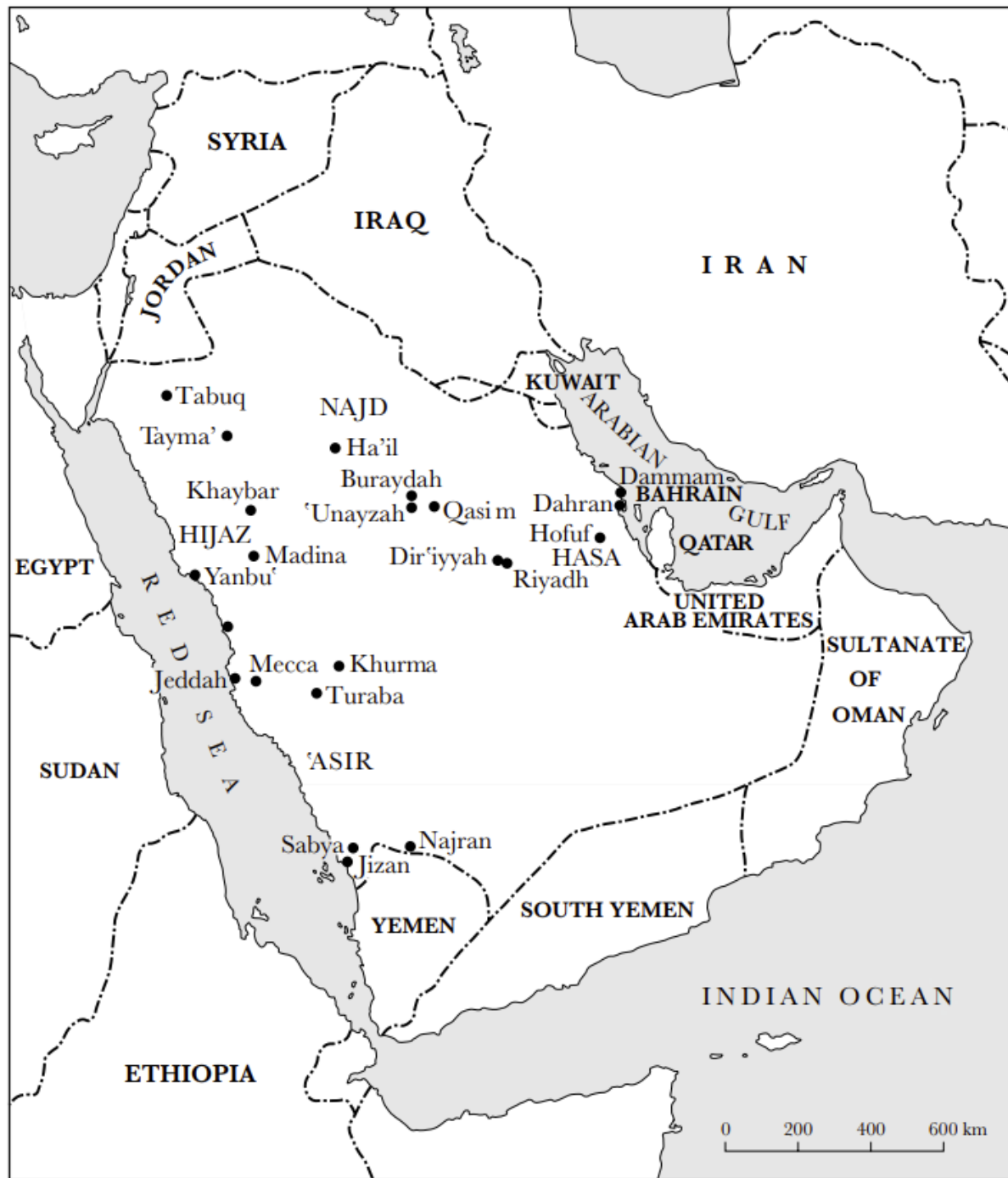
**So would you say that this change that Alula has gone through is national role model. And perhaps one day we will see in alula a school/ university education centre. Its not only becoming very big but also becoming one of the centres for heritage and restoration research. So Al'ula's own university or conservation centre for further education.**

They established an institute that was established by the RCA, its for research and depository work. But that's not enough. How about the students how about the new generation. You have to bring them there and you have to ask them to do design projects to provide them with

training programmes and opportunities to go and work in alula restoration experiencing visually. That's going to happen.

... There are so many Italian experts working in Saudi Arabian mud architecture and archaeological excavation s. I was in Najran last week and Najran is in the south of SA and it has a very unique architecture, like the towers like the Shibam similar size story and all these buildings are from mud. The team was from Italy .

## Primary Regions and Cities of Saudi Arabia



Clements, F. Saudi Arabia, main regions and cities. Clio press, 1988. [https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/43351/frontmatter/9780521643351\\_frontmatter.pdf](https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/43351/frontmatter/9780521643351_frontmatter.pdf).



