

Report:

Development of Archaeology in Saudi Arabia

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More than a quarter of a century ago, in 1976 Dr. Abdullah Hasan Masry, the Former Director General of Antiquities and Museums, talked about the ambitious plans of the Saudi government for the development of archaeology and establishment of museums in the Kingdom. He focused on the historical and archaeological legacy in Saudi Arabia. Dr. Masry is a pioneer researcher, planner and administrator of archaeology in the Kingdom (Masry 1977. Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies vol. 7 : pp.112-119).

In one of his papers published in *Atlat*, the Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology, Dr. Masry wrote, "it is no secret that we do not possess an adequate understanding of the depth and breadth of Arabian antiquity comparable to our knowledge of the other ancient regions in the Middle East". He presented a chronology of Saudi Arabian archaeology, starting from 200,000 years before present. Masry concluded with a promising note: "hopefully future investigations will help us articulate this theme fully and thereby afford ourselves a more adequate chronological outline than the one that has been offered here" (Masry, A. H. Seminar for Arabian Studies Vol.7, pp. 112-119, 1977.).

The present Department of Archaeology stands on the foundations laid by the Supreme Council for Antiquities and Museums; I feel honored and privileged to be the present Head of the Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums in the Kingdom. The legacy has changed now; we are proud of what we have

achieved during the last 30 years in all fields of archaeology. In 1975 the Department consisted of only few employees without a single Saudi archaeologist except Dr. Masry. Now in 2004, we have a large team of Saudi archaeologists; among them some have Masters and Doctorate degrees from Saudi, European and American universities.

I should also mention the establishment of the first Department of Archaeology and Museology at King Saud University led by Professor Abdulrahman al-Ansary, who is considered the father of Saudi Archaeology. Despite all the unexpected and "unavoidable circumstances," Dr. Ansary managed to convince the university to establish the department.

The initial archaeological activities in Arabia, mostly conducted by foreign participation, demonstrated the need for a controlled and systematic approach to the Kingdom's archaeology. It was to satisfy this need that the Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums initiated a "Comprehensive Archaeological Survey" in 1976. The aim was to document the archaeological remains in the entire Kingdom. The survey, thus far, has discovered about four thousand sites throughout the country. This is, however, an initial estimation and I am sure that further detailed studies and investigations will increase the number of archaeological sites.

In addition to the general Comprehensive Archaeological Survey of the entire Kingdom, other specialized surveys were also carried out.

Those included ancient trade and pilgrimage routes, the ancient mining survey, the rock art and epigraphic survey, the Paleolithic survey, the paleontological survey, and several other small scale regional surveys conducted during the last two decades. As a result, we now have a wider knowledge of the archaeology of Saudi Arabia. The comprehensive and the specialized survey projects were planned at the outset, in preparation for more systematic large scale excavations. Limited test excavations and soundings were also carried out as part of the ground survey work. Several important prehistoric sites in Dhahran and Jubail in the Eastern Region and in the newly developed industrial area of Tayma in the northwestern region were excavated on a rescue operation basis.

Based on the results of the surveys and initial excavations, our present understanding of Saudi archaeology provides a general framework of cultural and chronological sequences, from the early man to well developed prehistoric cultures. Thus, Saudi Arabian archaeology reveals the continuous presence of man in the Peninsula from the beginning of the Paleolithic to the present day, a period that covers about 1 million years.

Thanks to the Saudi government's generosity and serious stand towards the demands of archaeology in this country, millions of Saudi Riyals were spent on archaeological research under the five-year plans of the country, and this budgetary generosity has been maintained throughout the subsequent years until now. The success of these efforts is thus owed mainly to the generosity of the government which enabled the Department of Antiquities and Museums to launch and maintain a program of research, restoration, conservation and preservation of monuments, along with the es-

tablishment of a network of national, regional and local museums in the Kingdom. It also made possible the participation of prominent archaeologists and interested institutions from different parts of the world; Harvard University, Southwest Texas University, University of Missouri, University of California, Institute of Archaeology, London and the National Center for Science and Research (CNRS), France, are few institutions among the many that have actively participated in our comprehensive survey and excavation programs.

The following are some major projects that reflect the development of archaeology in Saudi Arabia:

1. The Comprehensive Archaeological Survey of the entire Kingdom conducted from 1976 to 1994 during which over 4000 archaeological sites were recorded from the northern, southern, western and eastern Regions of the Kingdom.
2. Specialized subjects surveys such as Darb Zubaydah; the early Islamic pilgrimage route from Kufa in Iraq to Makkah, on which several water and camp stations are recorded along its length from Kufa to Makkah.
3. A number of stations with somewhat well preserved stone road tracks and camping sites are recorded on the ancient Trade Route running between Yemen and Makkah.
4. Several camping sites are recorded on the Egyptian/Syrian coastal pilgrimage and trade route reaching to al-Madinah al-Munawwarah.
5. An Ancient mining survey was conducted in the northern and southwestern highlands and large number of ancient gold, silver and

copper mining sites as well as semi precious stone quarries have been recorded so far. Specialists from the Colorado School of Mines in the USA were involved in the investigations and documentation and were working along with the native Saudi archaeologists.

6. Another specialized survey, focusing on the rock art and epigraphy was initiated in 1985, and over the last ten years some 1200 rock art and epigraphic sites were documented in the different parts of the country. Saudi Arabia now stands among the richest rock art regions of the world. Hundreds of thousands of human and animal figures and thousands of Lihyanite, Dedanite, Nabataean, south and north Arabian Musnad inscriptions have been recorded, along with several hundreds of the so called Thamudic inscriptions. I am happy to say that over 3000 Kufic or early Arabic inscriptions in different forms and styles have been discovered which shed light on the different stages of evolution and development of Arabic writing. The oldest, dated "24th Hegra (644 AD)", Kufic inscription found so far was located on the ancient trade route linking Madain Saleh with al-Ula. It has been registered by the UNESCO in the Memory of the World.

7. Palaeontological survey and excavations were conducted in the eastern Region in collaboration with the French paleontologists. Fossils of Miocene period dating to 18 million years were excavated from various sites. The discovery of fossil bones of animals such as Giraffe, Mastodon, Gazelles, Rhinoceros and several others suggest a grassland and light forest type of environment during the Miocene which has now been transformed into desert.

The comprehensive and the specialized archaeological survey projects were planned at the outset, in preparation for future systematic large scale excavations. Limited test excavations were also carried out as part of the ground survey work. Based on the results of these surveys potential sites were chosen for excavations and large scale excavations started at Madain Saleh, Tayma, Dumat al-Jandal in the northern region; Thaj and Dhahran tomb fields in the eastern region; Neolithic site of Thumamah in the central region; Ukhdoud and Sihi in the southern region; and the Paleolithic sites of Dawadmi in the central region, and Shuwahtiyah in the Jouf Region which provides evidence of man's presence in the Peninsula one million years ago.

The results of the survey, excavations and research reports are published in *Atlat*, the bilingual (Arabic/English) annual journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology and several other publications of the Department. Recently we have published a series of archaeological books on the 13 administrative regions of Saudi Arabia covering all aspects of cultural heritage of these regions; these publications are the most up to date archaeological books on Saudi Arabia.

On the basis of survey and initial excavations, we can now postulate a general framework of Saudi Arabian cultural and chronological sequences. The evidence of the earliest man presence has been established by the location and excavation of the Acheulean site at Shuwayhtiyah in northern Saudi Arabia dated to about 1,200,000 years BP. There are additional hundreds of Middle Palaeolithic sites found in various parts of northern, central, western and southern parts of the country. Also now, we have a very strong record of well developed prehistoric cultures; early agri-

culture and littoral settlements that appear to date to circa 6,500 - 5,500 BC. The early Neolithic phase in Arabia is abundantly represented by a vast number of sites found on the borders of the great Arabian deserts; e.g., ar-Rub al Khali, the Nafud and the Dhana. This clearly suggests a very different environment and climate from today's extremely hot and dry conditions.

During the epoch from 3,500 to 3,000 BC, Arabia saw the emergence of the peculiar pattern of pastoralists and nomadic settlements which have been an enduring characteristic of the Arabian Peninsula. From the late 2500 to 2000 B.C. we find well developed urban centers throughout greater Arabia, exhibiting fully developed literary, religious and political structures (e.g. Madain Saleh, al-Ula, Tayma, Dumat al-Jandal, Thaj, al-Fau and Ukhdoud).

The current rapid development and expansion of towns and cities in the Kingdom threaten to disturb many archaeological sites. To protect them the Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums has launched a program of fencing those sites which are located near town and cities. During the last decade 200 sites have been protected by erecting 300,000 meters of fences.

In recent years the concept and roles of museums have undergone radical changes; the popular image of dusty institutions with presentations of little interest to the public is meaningless. Today, to be properly called a museum, the institution must have its own community to serve. Thus museums must be a conscious part of the community and the community must be aware that the museum is an integral part of it. Public co-operation and participation on a continuing basis can only be assured through museum services and programs

that designed to meet the needs of all or part of the community. Keeping this in mind, the Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums has developed a network of museums in several large cities throughout the country. The local museums are established in the big cities of Tayma, al-Ula, Dumat al-Jandal, Hofuf, Najran, Jazan while the regional museums have been placed in Jiddah, Taif, Hail and Dammam. In the coming months cultural museums will be opened in Makkah and Madinah. Each local or regional museum is fully equipped with modern research facilities for documentation, conservation, preservation, recording and controlling the antiquities of the area.

A National Museum in the Kingdom has been established in Riyadh, the capital of the Kingdom. Located in the center of the city, it covers an area of about 18 hectares. It consists of 9 galleries representing all chronological ages of Saudi Archaeology from Man and Nature, Lower Palaeolithic to the Saudi Kingdoms, Islamic Period and the Saudi dynasties to the modern age of Arabia.

The Department of Antiquities was established in 1962 under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, but as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been working on major development changes in all aspects, a Royal Decree was issued recently in 2003, to annex the Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums to the Supreme Commission of Tourism. The aim is to enhance the activities of archaeology and develop some of the archaeological sites for cultural tourism, thus bringing archaeology and tourism under the same umbrella.

The Supreme Commission for Tourism has prepared a strategy and action plan for the antiquities and Museums sector for the next 20 years, concentrating on the development of

cultural heritage, enhancing research, establishing new museums, and developing human resources.

Special emphasis will be given to the development of national laboratories for conservation and restoration in addition to nominating some important archaeological sites and monuments to be registered in the world heritage list.

A program will be devised to update and prepare the corpus of Saudi Archaeological sites for computer accession and prepare it for GIS database. Some priority areas for inventories are as follows:

- Ancient inscriptions
- Islamic inscriptions
- Rock art
- Prehistoric sites
- Ancient mining sites
- Dams and water irrigation systems
- Island sites in the Red Sea and the Gulf

Under the next five year plan the publications of the department will be increased by including a variety of media and approaches including paper publication, CD`s and videos, digital media and the effective use of the World Wide Web.

The next step towards the establishment and development of museums in the Kingdom shall include:

- Strengthening of the National Museum.
- Enhancement and development of existing regional museums.
- Developing provincial museums.

- Constructing museums in each of the 13 administrative region of the Kingdom.
- Constructing special museums such as Camel museum, Arabian Coffee Museum, Aviation Museum, etc.
- Construction of an Ethnographic Museum
- Construction of a Museum for Historical Cities
- Museum for the History of Education
- International and local exhibitions

Special emphasis over the next five year plan will be given to the restoration and development of archaeological, historical and traditional cultural sites. Archaeological and historical sites will be developed for tourism while ancient monuments, forts, towers and castles will be renovated for tourist attraction.

As a follow up of my predecessor, who 28 years ago talked to you about the development of archaeology in Saudi Arabia, I have presented this brief report on the new developments of archaeology in the Kingdom. I am sure, in ten or twenty years, another person who will take my place shall tell the annual gathering of the Seminar for Arabia Studies about further achievements in the cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia, and these will be much more tremendous and outstanding since Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz (the first Muslim astronaut and a highly energetic, motivated and ambitious young man, the General Director of the High Commission of Tourism) is taking keen interest in developing the archaeology of Saudi Arabia.

The foregoing account is a general outline framework of the past and present archaeological developments in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this report is to offer a meaningful syn-

thesis of content and to give an idea to the archaeologists and the researchers in the related field. Hopefully future researches and investigations and the ambitious plans of our efforts shall further shed light on the hidden treasures of our past history. We shall welcome new research and excavation proposals from those who are interested in coming to our country for this purpose. Saudi Arabia is not a closed country; we have opened our doors for all interested institutions and individual scholars who are interested in sharing with us the effort of our ongoing projects or they may even submit their own proposals for excavations or field investigations. Under the approved provisions of the Supreme Council of Antiquities and Museums, we are already working with French, German, Japanese and American institutions and archaeologists in addition to other international organizations such as ICOM, ICROM, ICOR, Arab League.

Recent Excavations and Surveys in the Kingdom

The Deputy Minister of Antiquities and Museum has several ongoing excavations which are part of the annual survey and excavation program the Deputy Ministry has been carrying out. During the recent (1424H/2003AD) excavations at Madain Saleh a tantalizing discovery of an engraved stone revealed a large inscription describing the renovation and restoration of the market place in the city center of Madain Saleh.

A large number of broken pieces of bowls, plates, lamps and a variety of typical Nabataean thin red wares decorated with geometrical patterns in dark brown have been collected from the excavations located at about 300 km on the road between Abu Hadriyahd and Dammam/al-Riyadh highway running towards Wadi al-

Miyah and As-Sarrar. Several excavations have been carried out at this site since 1419H (1998 AD). During this year's excavations, a large pottery manufacturing kiln has been discovered, which is the first of its kind in the Eastern Region. In addition, large numbers of pottery sherds of different sizes and shapes have been found along with square shaped incense burners, broken pieces of terracotta, human and animal figurines, sea shells, and bones.

Al-Uqair, located near Al-Ahsa, is the old port in the eastern region of the Kingdom. The excavations, just as was the case with the previous two seasons, continued to reveal building structures along with ferns, grinding stones, and pottery sherds. The site is to be developed for cultural tourism.

Tayma is located southeast of Tabuk. It is famous for its antiquities such as its ancient fortification wall, Haddaj well, al-Hamra Palace and hundreds of burials located in the modern industrial area of the city. Salvage excavations were carried out on the mounds located in the industrial zone of the city. Each mound contained two or more burial chambers, covered with cap stone, and an additional side burial covered with a moveable stone slab. Besides remains of human bodies, a large number of objects such as bowls, plates, incense burners, beads, copper earrings, copper head of lancers, and pottery lamps were found in the burials. These burials are attributed to a period between the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 1st century B.C.

The excavations on the site of al-Ukhdoud in Najran, in the south of the Kingdom, continued for the 5th season. Several architectural units consisting of several rooms have been located; additionally, other finds include pottery

bowls of various sizes and shapes, plates, cups, lids and incense burners, two silver and bronze coins dating to the 2nd Century AD. Moreover, several ancient South Arabian (Musnad Al-Janubi) inscriptions were found engraved on the walls indicating names of persons and deities. Broken stone idols and the name of the deities suggest that this particular room in the building had some religious im-

portance.

The Deputy Ministry of Antiquities and Museums has a very ambitious and potentially promising ongoing rock art and epigraphic survey program. In 2003 AD the areas of Jubbah and the newly discovered sites of Shuwaymis were thoroughly surveyed and investigated. 862 rock art and inscription sites at Jubbah, and 150 sites at Shuwaymis have been identified.

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