

EDITORIAL

My friend Mohammad Al-Debaisy, the well known poet and man of letters, and the Deputy Chairman of the Literary and Cultural Club of Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah, called me recently and said, “I am inviting you to Al-‘Aqieq Cultural Forum in its second session. The topic will be ‘The Visual Culture.’” “What is ‘The Visual Culture?’” I asked. “Please attend,” he said, “and you will hear what you will like.” “It will be my pleasure,” I said, and made up my mind to attend.

On the morning of Tuesday 13 May, 2008 (8/5/1429H) the proceedings of the Forum commenced. I was only a listener to comprehend what was presented on “Visual Formation” in the modern poem, the revival of history in contemporary Arabic Poetry, the semiotics of formal arts in the modern poetic text, the aesthetics of advertisements, the Shadow as a dominant element, the Formal Art between privacy and emotion. These were only a few titles among many others to which I enjoyed listening. I was thunderstruck by the richness of these studies with which I have not been familiar, although, prior to majoring in Archaeology, I specialized in Arabic Literature.

The concluding session addressed the art of Arabic Calligraphy: its styles and aesthetics. The speaker was Othman Taha, the famous calligraphist and leader of trade. He related his long experience with the various kinds of calligraphy, who were his teachers from whom he picked up his method and style, and how he was able to end each page of the holy Quran with a complete verse and begin the next page with another full verse. His presentation was erudite, informative, and entertaining.

All presentations were learned, enriching, and enjoyable. What pleased me most was the fact that all speakers were young scholars, well trained in the modernist approaches, and were able to apply these approaches to the Arabic Literature. At the end of the session I requested a moment to throw in a comment. In it I said that I learned much in the field of poetry, theater, cinema, novel, and formal arts. I wished that some of you had addressed the art of caricatures, one of the influential expressive arts which critique and call for social reform. Again, I did draw the attention of researchers to the lines, drawings, and artistic portraits of which the slopes of mountains in the Arabian Peninsula and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are replete. I believe those will open new horizons for researchers. To say the least, this forum has been an incentive for me to look at things at which prior to this meeting I would not have looked. My thanks go to the speakers (men and women) and to the Literary and Cultural Club of Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah for having invited me and for the well-chosen topics it presents.

The High Commission for the Development of Hail Region, headed by HRH Prince Saud bin

Abdul Muhsin bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud extended a generous invitation to a group of specialist archaeologists to tour the commission's archaeological activities in the Region of Hail, especially the excavations at Fayd archaeological site which is carried out by Dr. Fahad al-Hawas and his Saudi colleagues. The group consisted of myself, Professor Abdullah Hassan al-Misry, Professor Saad bin Abdulaziz al-Rashid, Professor Ahmed al-Zayla'i, Dr. Ali al-Mughanam, Dr. Dhaifallah al-Talhi, and Mr. Jahaz al-Shammari.

On the morning of Monday, June 30, 2008 (25/6/1429), the Commission provided us with transportation to the site of Fayd, some 130 km to the southeast of the city of Hail. The site enjoyed a leading role and fame on the trade route during pre-Islamic history and on the Hajj route between Iraq and Makkah al-Mukaramah and al-Madinah al-Munawarah during the Islamic times. Thirty years ago when I first saw the site I believed it hid much, and believed that lucky will be he whoever is able to have the chance to excavate it. When Professor Saad al-Rashid, a specialist in Islamic archaeology, wanted to excavate an Islamic site, I suggested Fayd to him. He, however, preferred al-Rabathah, perhaps because of its association with the name of Abi Dhar al-Ghafari, the great companion of the prophet (pbuh). I never forgot Fayd, nevertheless. The chance presented itself when I took part in a committee that interviewed Fahad al-Hawas who applied to the Ph.D. candidacy. Once more I suggested that he excavate Fayd since his MA thesis was on the traditional architecture in the city of Hail. My point, at the time, was that his writing on and excavation of Fayd will complement his earlier thesis. He fortunately accepted.

As time went by, I learned that Fahad did start excavating Fayd; I was too eager to see what he had done. When I received the invitation I immediately and joyfully accepted. It could not have come in a better time; not only will I see what has become of Fayd, but I will also be in the company of a well-chosen group knitted together for years by admiration and fruitful joint work.

As we arrived at the site, we realized we were in for a wonderful surprise. Fahad and his colleagues excavated for only three seasons, but what they achieved in such a short period would have taken foreign expeditions several seasons. To our surprise, the outer and some of the internal walls had already been exposed along with many features of markets, shops, and ovens. And for the first time ever an octagonal pool of the Palace was exposed. The adjacent Mosque, however, attracted our attention for a long time: from the Mihrab (Imam position) eastward, columns were square and there appears an eastern wall; westward, however, columns were round. The rest of the western columns did not appear yet because the adjacent land is a private property (future excavation may later become possible). Again, the space at the Qibla corridor accommodates no more than one row of praying people, although the mosque's estimated dimensions make it one of the largest. In fact, its area is larger than the two mosques discovered at al-Rabathah. Perhaps this mosque had served different functions at earlier stages.

Of what we saw, the most impressive was the simultaneous preservation of whatever was excavated, and here the efforts of Dr. Abdunasser Al-Zahrani, the conservation expert at the College of Tourism and Archaeology, KSU, are too obvious. One, in fact, cannot help but feel that the walls are too natural and untreated.

In the evening His Royal Highness the Amir of the Hail Region received us. We conveyed to him our joy over what we had seen and heard, and he was pleased with our comments. The audience included a crowd of Hail dignitaries and the President of Hail University, Professor Ahmed Al-Saif. We were, later, honored with the invitation to dine with His Royal Highness. After dinner, we joined the members of the Commission for a meeting, headed by His Royal Highness, where we discussed the importance of supporting this outstanding scholarly work. Lucky is the Region of Hail to have this exceptional Amir, and lucky is Fayd to have such committed excavators of our glorious Islamic heritage.

Al-Hijr (Madain Saleh) is the central gemstone of our historical heritage which stretches back to the third millennium B.C. This fact has been proven by the last archaeological discovery at the top of Mount al-Khramat, that is, the presence of mound burials similar to those found in Tuma (Rijoum Sa'sa') which in turn resemble the burials of Hili in the United Arab Emirates. Having celebrated last year Petra's promotion into one of the 21st century World Seven Wonders, we believe the significance al-Hijr deserves no less, especially if we take into consideration its 30 unique texts which neither Petra nor its Nabataean affiliate areas have.

In al-Hijr, Nabataeans documented their history artistically and authenticated it in writing. They recorded their events and entrusted their history to al-Hijr because it was far from enemies, although it was the southern frontline facing Ptolemaean raiders and Romans who might circle back through the ports of the Red Sea.

Al-Hijr (Madain Saleh) is the pride of ancient heritage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and will become a World landmark inviting visitors from all places. The government, May Allah bless her, represented by the General Commission of Tourism and Archaeology groomed by HRH Prince Sultan bin Salman, will spare no efforts in providing al-Hijr with the necessary facilities a visitor needs. The UNESCO's inclusion of al-Hijr in World Heritage is surely a day of joy for archaeologists, historians, those interested in architecture, and all lovers of human civilizations. The features and elements of civilization that Al-Hijr's enjoys make it imperative for the international community to include it in the World Heritage Record. And more sites should follow suit.

Editor -in-Chief