

The Development of Nabataean Madā'in Šāliḥ (Saudi Arabia) into an Attractive Sightseeing: From Traditional Rejection to Official Recognition

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Abstract

In recent years, major excavations and tourist development occurred in the archaeological site of Madā'in Šāliḥ known as the Nabatean 'Hegra', in north-western Arabia. If such a development would be quite familiar in several countries, its understanding within the Saudi context encompasses the study of several factors. The article takes the religious tradition Hegra is associated to as starting point to analyze the transformation of the Nabatean site into both a Saudi heritage landmark and an attractive tourist attraction. The description of the development of archaeological excavations and museums in Hegra and the surrounding al-'Ulā leads to the conclusion that education and tourism advocate in favor of Nabatean legacy's acknowledgment in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Archaeology, heritage, Madā'in Šāliḥ, Saudi Arabia, tourism, museum.

Introduction

“And certainly did the people of Al-Hijr deny the messengers. And We gave them Our signs, but from them they were turning away. And they used to carve from the mountains, houses, feeling secure. But the shriek seized them at early morning. So nothing availed them [from] what they used to earn.” (Qur'an, 15:80-84).

“Madā'in Šāliḥ, an ancient city built by the Nabateans, is a place of extraordinary cultural heritage. A place that must be safeguarded for generations to come.” (Royal Commission for AlUla, 2018a)

Nearly 14 centuries separate these two messages on Al-Hijr, Hegra or Madā'in Šāliḥ, the second major city of the ancient Nabataean kingdom after Petra (Jordan) located in northwestern Saudi Arabia. So many centuries mingled with rejection, discovery, recognition and celebration of Madā'in Šāliḥ's remains among the most beautiful in the world. Since 2018, Madā'in Šāliḥ has been embarking into a unique tourist development project that aims at attracting foreign investments and

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international visitors, leaving behind the traditional religious resentment of Nabataean Madā'in Šāliḥ seen as a component of the so-called *aṣr al-jāhiliyya* (era of ignorance).

To understand how and why Saudi Arabia is turning Madā'in Šāliḥ into a major heritage site, we need to convey the concept of 'patrimonialization', which, according to sociologist Jean Davallon, consists of "extracting from the first (use) or the second (out of order) context a real thing to preserve it" (Mairesse and Desvallées, 2011: 254). This involves several stages from the discovery of the object to its celebration through its display and passing on to future generations. Based on this definition, the article focuses on the processes of collect, display and media communication of Madā'in Šāliḥ to understand the Saudi use of archaeology and museum to clear traditional rejection in order to turn an archaeological site into both a symbol of Saudi Arabia's archaeological heritage and a touristic destination for worldwide visitors.

The first part of the article presents a brief history of Madā'in Šāliḥ and explains its belonging to traditional *aṣr al-jāhiliyya* beliefs that has been lasting from early Islamic period. The second part describes the heritage-to-be processes implemented in Madā'in Šāliḥ since 1960s to show the progressive official recognition of the importance of the site. The third one tells the transformation of Madā'in Šāliḥ into tourist destination and insists on the unavoidable balance between the respect of popular and religious opinions and the necessary needs in transforming the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia into a wealthy, attractive and trusted country.

Madā'in Šāliḥ into common *aṣr al-jāhiliyya* beliefs

Madā'in Šāliḥ is one of the thousands archaeological sites of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is located in northwestern Saudi Arabia, in the governorate of al-'Ulā, one of the most fertile valleys of the Hijāz region. Thanks to hydraulic components, Madā'in Šāliḥ and the close valley have been attracting populations for millenary. One of the famous civilizations to spread there, the Nabataean Kingdom, has left remains of a town and more than 90 majestic rock-cut tombs whose architectural elements recall Petra in Jordan. However Madā'in Šāliḥ has remained scientifically quite unknown for centuries due to a religious belief raised after the advent of Islam that prevented anyone to enter and settle there.

The story of Madā'in Šāliḥ

Madā'in Šāliḥ has been especially inhabited by the Nabataeans between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. The town, named Hegra then, comprised urban settlements, agricultural infrastructures, rock-cut tombs (fig.1) and cult places, and is implemented at 320 km of Yatrib, future Medina, on the caravan route leading South Arabia to Petra and the Mediterranean ports. By settling there, the Nabataeans nomadic shepherds engaged in incense and myrrh trade supervised the caravans heading to their capital Petra. The Nabataeans are best know for their impressive rock-cut tombs whose decorated façades give information on their artistic and hand-crafted skills.



Figure 1: Rock-cut tombs of Madā'in Šāliḥ, Saudi Arabia © Author, 2015

Nabataeans ruled the place until 106 A.D. when Roman Emperor Trajan conquers Hegra and makes the town the southern limit of its flourishing Empire. Greek and Latin graffiti have been left behind but the town shows no evidence of Romanization as one can see in other cities of the Empire.

Following the advent of Islam in the seventh century, the obligation to perform the *hajj* to the Holy Cities of Medina and Mecca, had an impact on Madā'in Šāliḥ and the neighboring city of al-'Ulā (which today gives its name to a both a town, and a governorate of more than 22 000). Both ceased to be merchant cities to become halts for pilgrims traveling from Damascus. There, they were offered necessary water and supplies before entering the arid part of Hijāz.

During the Islamic period, Madā'in Šāliḥ is no longer inhabited. In fact, the town is famous in the religious tradition for being part of the *aṣr al-jāhiliyya* (era of ignorance) filled with polytheistic and idolatrous cults as an opposition to the *aṣr al-islāmiyya* (era of Islam) that is said to have brought divine light and monotheism. Since Muhammad's preaching, pre-Islamic societies would have become synonymous with anti-Islam. The tradition quoted Abraham's disapproval of worshipping statues ("By God, I will pit your idols with hindsight as soon as you have your back turned" (Qur'an, 21:57-58)), while Muhammad himself would have destroyed idols of the sanctuary of Mecca (Qur'an, 17:81).

Worshipping deities and erected stones are intrinsically connected to pre-Islamic polytheistic societies, which were to be fought by monotheism. The Qur'anic tradition thus advises believers to meditate on the divine punishment inflicted on people who had refused to convert themselves to monotheism:

“That was a nation which has passed on. It will have [the consequence of] what it earned, and you will have what you have earned. And you will not be asked about what they used to do.” (Qur'an, 2:134)

“And how many a city did We destroy while it was committing wrong - so it is [now] fallen into ruin - and [how many] an abandoned well and [how many] a lofty palace.” (Qur'an, 22:45)

It is not a mere narration of historical facts, but a more precise aim at teaching lessons to be learned from a common past and encouraging recipients of the divine message to ponder over the events inflicted by God to people who refused to follow their commandments.

The Qur'an recalls many times² a specific event that happened to Thāmur people thought to have lived in Madā'in Šāliḥ. One day, a prophet named Šāliḥ come to meet the Thāmur to order them to convert to monotheism for their sake. The Thāmur, who do not want to give up their ancestors' faith, then ask Šāliḥ for a proof of the superiority of monotheism. Šāliḥ addresses himself to God and a rock cracks, revealing a camel and the order to the Thāmur to share their source of water with the animal under penalty of a terrible punishment if they fail. The Thāmur refuse to obey and kill the camel in challenging Šāliḥ to carry out his threats when:

“[...] the shriek seized those who had wronged, and they became within their homes [corpses] fallen prone as if they had never prospered therein. Unquestionably, Thāmur denied their Lord; then, away with Thāmur.” (Qur'an, 11: 67-68).

Passing through al-'Ulā valley in 631 while traveling to northern Arabia, Muhammad perpetuates the memory of this divine punishment by forbidding his companions and next generations of believers to spend the night in Madā'in Šāliḥ, to drink water from its source and pray there. Subsequently, chroniclers and historians (Tabarī, 839-923, Ibn al-Athīr, born in 1160, Ibn al-Kalbī, 819-20) reported and transmitted these commandments as well as considerations on pre-Islamic vanished societies to future generations.

In the 12th century, a town is built at thirty kilometers in the center of al-'Ulā valley. There two of the earliest mosques of Islam are built, one strictly on a spot where Muhammad stopped and prayed during his journey to the town of Tabūk. Thus al-'Ulā welcomes caravans of pilgrims and famous Muslim travelers such as Ibn Battūta, but Madā'in Šāliḥ remains unvisited. In 1908, the last Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II inaugurates the Hijāz Railway line that aims to replace slow caravans by fast locomotives for pilgrims coming from Damascus. Two railway stations are built in al-'Ulā valley including one in Madā'in Šāliḥ village that starts living again. Only for few years still before the Arab Revolt of 1916-18 forces the Ottomans to leave Hijāz, and the integration of al-'Ulā into the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Ottoman stations and fortresses are abandoned as well as Madā'in Šāliḥ, again.

However, when the Qur'an refers to Pre-Islamic societies and orders lessons to

² Qur'an, 7:73- 82;11:62-68; 15:80-84; 17:59; 26:155-159; 27:48-53; 54:27-31; 91:11-15

learn from their behavior, it does not dictate the attitude to adopt when a traveler or an archaeologist discovers the remains: to contemplate, preserve, or destroy them? In his interpretation of the Qur'an *Tafsir al-Mizan*, Allamah Tabataba'i insists on the relationship between his contemporaries and ancient ruins:

“The desire to travel and visit the remains of our ancestors, the past generations, the king and the rebellious pharaohs, is due to the lessons that we can learn. We witness that they have vanished alongside their grand abodes, or their hidden accumulated treasures, or their luxurious thrones and their people did not receive any benefit from them. God has simply left them there for future generations to glean advice from and by which common people can see and learn.” (Tabataba'i 1974:vol.4,37).

For a long time the Pre-Islamic period has not been integrated into the past of the Muslim community (*umma*) to the extent that from the nineteenth century, “Madā'in Šāliḥ” (the cities of Šāliḥ) has been used to rename the Nabataean town called Hegra. A well has also been renamed *mahlīb al-nāqa* (well of the camel) as a souvenir. In 1916, German orientalist Bernhard Moritz visits al-'Ulā and takes a picture of Ottoman soldiers standing on “a stone-carved mortar which, according to popular belief, was the milk jug of local saint Shaykh Šāleḥ” (Moritz, 1916) (fig.2). Studies of Madā'in Šāliḥ's tombs have shown that anyone ever inhabited or used them unlike the tombs of Petra where of which are still occupied as by Bedouins and shepherds (Nehmé, 2015:80).



Figure 2: A stone-carved mortar which, according to popular belief, was the milk jug of local saint Shaykh Šāleḥ, photographed by Bernhard Moritz in al-'Ulā in 1916 © Library of Congress, LOT 3704, no. 59a [item] [P&P]

The traditional legacy has been vivid since recent years as in 2011, an episode of *History of the Prophets* the TV show (broadcast on the channel El Watan and YouTube) is dedicated to the story of the prophet Šāliḥ. Presenter Sheikh Nabil Al-Awadi is filmed in Madā'in Šāliḥ, which serves as a backdrop to the story of Thāmuḍ's misadventure. Wide and close-up shots of tombs and mountains follow each other, while the episode ends with the justification of the contemplation of

so-called palaces cut in the mountains as witnesses of its existence in this accursed region.

The rediscovery of Hegra with archaeology and museum concepts

Early epigraphic discoveries, institutionalization of archeology and the development of museums by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia blur resentments towards the pre-Islamic period. Since 1960s, historians and archaeologists have helped to open up mentalities to the archeology of the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, and have made the ancestral soil of the Arabs and Islam a breeding ground for conceptual, even theological, reversal of firmly anchored *a priori*. In the 1970s and 1980s, the search for the archaeological past of the Saudi kingdom and the valorization of its remains take a place of constant growth that ensures the transformation of the country into a modern one, while maintaining its place as guardian of Islam. Thanks to the development of the museum concept, archaeologists help the large-scale dissemination of their work at the same time as they pave the way for new knowledge, especially on Madā'in Šāliḥ that, from cursed city, has become a part of Saudi national heritage.

Looking for Nabataean presence in Arabia

In 1871, the Royal Geographical Society of London sends poet and traveler Charles M. Doughty (1843-1926) to the Holy Land. There he undertakes a hike in the Negev desert before going to Petra where he is informed of a more beautiful city in a land forbidden to non-Muslims: Madā'in Šāliḥ. Without any other preparation and on his own initiative to be the first European to travel there, the British disguises as a Syrian pilgrim and joins the caravan en route to Mecca with the aim of leaving at Madā'in Šāliḥ. With the help of paper towel, brush and sponge, he copies and stamps several inscriptions he will send over to French writer Ernest Renan for publication. Before getting back to London, he meets in Tā'if the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Muhammad. The two men talk about the rock tombs of Madā'in Šāliḥ in such words:

“He asked of the monuments [so much magnified among koran readers] at Medain Sâlih (sic). I responded frankly, ‘that the houses of the citizens had been of clay; the chambers hewn in the rock where sepulchral; that in the floors of the chambers are hewn sepulchres.’ The tolerant Sherîf acquiesced, soberly musing and smoking; and doubtless he mused (though my words sounded contrary to the letter of the koran), that a studied European were unlikely to be mistaken. *The Sherîf*: ‘Are there bones in the chambers?’-‘The hewn sepulchres in the monument-chambers are full of human bones; I found also grave-clothes, and a resinous matter, wherewith doubtless the carcasses were embalmed.’ - ‘Wonderful!’ Said the Sherîf: then turning himself to the audience, he spoke to them of the mummies of Egypt. ‘How marvellous! quote (sic) he, that the human flesh has been preserved these three thousand or four thousand, or more years, in which time even stones decay!’” (Doughty, 1921:251).

A decade later, French explorer and naturalist Charles Huber travels to the Hijāz

for the French Ministry of Education. In Madā'in Šāliḥ he merely transcribes or stamps accessible inscriptions, some of which already been recorded by Doughty.

In 1907, the Dominican Fathers Janssen and Savignac travel to Madā'in Šāliḥ and al-'Ulā to copy and study Nabataean inscriptions and other Dadanitic and Thamoudic graffiti. During their only mission in Madā'in Šāliḥ, they report the existence of an engraved block and small square edifices (about three meters wide), including a fragment of door that could testify of the existence of houses. The Ottoman soldiers, there to oversee the construction of the railway, had already recovered in these buildings a large number of Nabataean coins as well as a sundial now held in Istanbul. The Fathers regrets the obvious lack of interest in these antiquities from the Ottoman government. The same government that in its history had launched dozens of archaeological excavations throughout the Empire but none in the Hijāz, the sacred land of Islam (Jaussen and Savignac, 1914: I-303; II-59).

Then Madā'in Šāliḥ suffers the same disinterest from Saudi officials until the creation of a Department of Antiquities and Museums in 1963 whose objectives were the preservation of the archaeological and historical sites of the kingdom, as well as development of museums for the citizens. In 1966, Saudi archaeologists make a first survey in Madā'in Šāliḥ, followed in 1972 by the creation of an archaeological fenced and guarded park. In 1975, Madā'in Šāliḥ appears in the first book of the Department of Antiquities and Museums for non-specialist readers named *An Introduction to: Saudi Arabian Antiquities*, before appearing in the scientific publication *ATLAL. Journal of Saudi Arabian Archeology* as one of the main Pre-Islamic sites officially excavated during the Comprehensive Archaeological Survey Program (1976-81). Finally in the early 2000s, Saudi archaeologists developed in Hegra a long and fruitful scientific partnership with French archaeologists Prof. François Villeneuve and Dr. Laïla Nehmé that lasts today.

Besides the growing interest of Saudi Arabia in highlighting the richness of Pre-Islamic civilizations that participated in the history of the Arabian Peninsula, exhaustive excavations is also part of the kingdom's socio-economic development programs launched in 1970 by king Faysal. These programs include increasing the number of schools and universities where history and archaeology will be taught. The museum quickly becomes a must-see place to teach and encourage the recognition of Saudi Arabia's archaeological heritage.

Displaying Madā'in Šāliḥ into a regional museum in al-'Ulā

From the first excavations they ruled, Saudi authorities have expressed the will to display into public museums the antiquities gradually revealed by archaeologists. In 1978 in Riyadh opens a "museum of archeology and ethnography" (closed in 1999 to be replaced by the National Museum) deeply devoted to tell the story of the Saudi part of the Arabian Peninsula from Prehistoric times to the advent of Islam. A project of six regional museums throughout the kingdom, including one in al-'Ulā city center follows. Finally opened in 1987, each regional museum presents a permanent exhibition space telling the story of Saudi Arabia from prehistory to the

unification of the Kingdom.

The museums were aimed to become community spaces in order to “play an active role in the local community, especially by expressing the role of the history and traditions of local communities in the community history and culture of the kingdom”, and “develop a historical and national consciousness of the citizens” (Michael Rice and Company London et al., 1978:14). The concept is thus based on a museographic restitution of a cultural history to which local and national citizens could identify. The chronological journey of each museum, although sequenced to facilitate the understanding of specific archaeological sites or civilizations, does not divide time into “Pre-Islamic” and “Islamic” periods. Thus the events that took place before Hegira (622) are mentioned according to the international Gregorian calendar using the birth year of the Christ as turning point.

The museum of archeology and popular heritage of al-‘Ulā (now closed for renovation) offers a museographic restitution of the history of the whole region, since its geological constitution until its integration in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Prehistoric, Dadanitic, Lihyanite, Nabataean, Muslim, Ottoman and Saudi populations who have lived or passed through the valley are thus associated to represent the great history of Saudi Arabia. Nabataean Hegra is presented into five sub-sections among the twenty-six of the museum: four panels including « Madā'in Šāliḥ and the Nabataeans », « Carving a Nabataean tomb », « The Nabataean language », « Nabataean sites » and a showcase devoted to « Nabataean pottery » (fig.3). Texts, photographs and drawings are mainly used to convey historical facts at a time (1987) when deep excavations were just launched. The sole showcase contains only fifteen pottery fragments or almost complete vases.



Figure 3: Panels and showcase displays on Madā'in Šāliḥ in the museum of archaeology and ethnography in al-‘Ulā © Author, 2015

The lack of mention of the *jāhiliyya* term is particularly striking. At no time is the Thāmuḍ people mentioned for having refused the conversion offered by the prophet Ṣāliḥ. Despite the fact that this episode that truly marks religious tradition as well popular conceptions of punishment and salvation, its non-evocation could be explained by the particularly scholarly nature of the museum contents, which offers little space for religious and popular beliefs. Even the term “Pre-Islamic” is used only once to describe the various writings discovered in al-‘Ulā.

The touristic shift: a necessary balance between popular beliefs and needs in touristic incomes

Until today, al-‘Ulā museum remains the only cultural and scientific institution of the city, with few private museums. There as anywhere in Saudi Arabia, the first audience target has always been schools pupils who could use the museum to go beyond their history courses that do not imply teaching of Pre-Islamic Arabia yet. The second audience is families and adults, to encourage them to spend more leisure time and money in their country rather than in foreign destinations. In the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia thus starts to implement more leisure and accommodation facilities (parks, museums, malls, hotels) to develop domestic tourism. This leisure tourism would develop aside of religious tourism to Medina and Mecca and would imply respect of Islamic tradition and customs. In fact, Saudi Arabia leans on Qur’anic prescription saying that traveling outside a familiar territory is prescribed for the spiritual and physical benefits it provides: health and well-being, stress reducing, better servitude to God, acquisition of knowledge, patience and perseverance (Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010:80)³.

Tourism in Saudi Arabia is used as part of a promotional campaign to enhance interest and recognition of Pre-Islamic history, recognition somehow difficult to obtain as El Watan documentary on Thāmuḍ punishment proves. For more than ten years then, Saudi Arabia has been turning Nabataean Madā’in Ṣāliḥ in both a national and worldwide sightseeing and a symbol of Saudi heritage. Will this be enough to encourage Saudi citizens and Muslim travelers to visit it?

The recognition of Madā’in Ṣāliḥ as national and world heritage treasure

As early as 2005, a Saudi delegation from UNESCO proposed the inscription of Madā’in Ṣāliḥ on the World Heritage List for two major criteria: Interchange of values (ii), to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; Testimony to cultural tradition (iii), to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared. In

³ Qur’an, 3:137; 6:11; 10:22; 12:109; 16:36; 22:46; 27:69; 29:20; 30: 9; 30:42; 34:18; 35:44; 40:21, 40:82; 57:10; 67: 15.

2008, the site and its tombs and wells as well as fifty inscriptions and rock drawings joins the 1,007 cultural and natural properties already inscribed on the List at the time. To have chosen Madā'in Šāliḥ to represent the first Saudi site to become “world heritage” is not trivial. Rediscovered by European travelers, this site still feeds the imagination associated with the ancient caravan route as well as it testifies of Saudi acceptance of both Pre-Islamic history and international heritage codes.

In order to enhance the touristic potential of Madā'in Šāliḥ and Saudi willingness in protecting and displaying its history to the world, the registration is accompanied by the implementation of a visiting way through the Nabataean site, with education facilities such as written tools near major elements (tombs, diwān). The Ottoman railway buildings and fort are fully renovated (fig.4) with accommodation facilities (visitor center, mosques, shops, toilets) and two museums: one of performing *ḥajj* through Madā'in Šāliḥ (Syrian Hajj Road Museum), the other on the Ottoman railway (Railway Museum). Inside them, large panels with texts and photographs recall the museographic approach of al-'Ulā museum and few selected high-valued original objects and copies are displayed including a beautifully inscribed Ottoman road marker, a 19th century pilgrims litter and a locomotive. Still the Nabataean history remains in al-'Ulā museum only. The touristic facilities seem thus to be *ḥajj* and Islamic-oriented in order to change progressively popular opposition to the whole site.



Figure 4: Railway Museum in Madā'in Šāliḥ opened by Saudi Arabia for the inscription of the site on UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008 © Author, 2015

Yet the communication strategy turning Madā'in Šāliḥ into Pre-Islamic and Islamic national and worldwide landmark does raise questions about its appropriation by the Saudis. Alaa Alrawaibah shows that the local community did not feel invested at that time, neither by the recognition of this site as national heritage, nor by its inscription on the World Heritage List, to the point where people had tagged the facades of some tombs in trying to prove that an international recognition did not suggest a local recognition (Alrawaibah, 2014:147).

Local attempts to reject the opening of Madā'in Šāliḥ to tourists do not prevent Saudi Arabia to continuously use the site as a symbol of its heritage even in marketing products. Starbucks™ Coffee Company well implemented in the country - with already fifty cafes only in Riyadh - commercialize Saudi versions of its « city mugs »: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh et Jeddah. The one on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia displays Madā'in Šāliḥ's tombs as landmark symbolizing the whole country. The choice of Madā'in Šāliḥ as emblem of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is indicative of the use of archaeological heritage as consumer goods to promote Kingdom's awareness and openness. The object also contributes to the promotion of the site outside Saudi perspective and towards international employees and future tourists who are common clients of the company.

The expensive touristic development project of Madā'in Šāliḥ

From archaeological site used to promote national recognition of Pre-Islamic heritage separated from its significant traditional rejection, Madā'in Šāliḥ has become a high-potential touristic destination to fulfill Saudi's vision for the future: keeping a range into international heritage stage and targeting foreign investments. In 2017, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman launches « Vision 2030 » development plan that includes projects for the Kingdom to become a global investment powerhouse as well as “attractions that are of the highest international standards, improve visa issuance procedures for visitors, and prepare and develop [their] historical and heritage sites”⁴.

Madā'in Šāliḥ and the whole region of al-'Ulā have been incorporated into this political and economic project from its starts with the announcement of the transformation of the valley into a luxury tourist destination. Al-'Ulā governorate (fig.5) extends to more than 22 561 m² - approximately the size of Belgium - and comprises basaltic plateau, sand plains, oasis and gardens, and archaeological and historical sites dating from Prehistoric times to Ottoman era. These natural and historical elements form a majestic ensemble that the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) intends to make accessible to international tourists and worth preserving by future generations.

⁴A full version of the vision is available online : https://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/report/Saudi_Vision2030_EN_2017.pdf



Figure 5: Al-'Ulā valley © Author, 2018

The RCU was founded in July 2017 and is chaired by Prince Bader bin 'Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Farhan al-Sa'ūd, who is also Minister of Culture. Its main duties to transform al-'Ulā into high-quality tourist destination and to attract billions of investments are accompanied with the pursuit of scientific studies, the restoration of historical monuments, the study and preservation of fauna and flora, the collection of oral archives from inhabitants of the valley, the training of students in the fields of archeology, tourism and agriculture abroad (France, United Kingdom and United States of America), and finally the implementation of visit paths, museums, sports activities facilities, hotels and resorts.

On April 10, 2018, France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia sign cooperation agreements in the field of culture, artistic exchanges and the development of cultural and creative industries. Among these agreements, the touristic enhancement of al-'Ulā renews and deepens cultural exchanges between France and Saudi Arabia and allows the implementation of respective objectives: a new valuation of French expertise abroad just five months after the inauguration of the Louvre Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates); an application of the Saudi economic development program "Vision 2030" for the diversification of the economy and the creation of jobs for youth. Mirroring RCU, the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA) is created in July 2018 to set up an urban plan (transport infrastructures, water management, renewable energies), design museums, and participate in the training of future employees of this huge touristic complex whose construction costs would be around 45 to 90 billion dollars.

The Saudi-French agreements also include the holding of an exhibition on al-'Ulā at the Arab World Institute in Paris in Autumn 2019. Designed by Arab

World Institute in partnership with RCU, this exhibition is the first devoted to the long history of al-‘Ulā valley as place of caravan trade and pre-Islamic deities worship, as a halt for Muslim pilgrims and travelers during thirteen centuries and as perfect example of relationship between nature and human populations for millenary. In the exhibition, Madā’in Šāliḥ is magnified by two main elements: a “Hegra from above” movie by famous French photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand, and the construction of a 1:1 scale replica of a decorated-façade tomb, inside which for the first time is told the Nabataean funeral ceremony from the preparation of the body to its installation into the tomb. The display is based on the most recent discoveries from the Hegra Archaeological Project led by Dr Laïla Nehmé. At the exit of the tomb, a showcase with Roman artifacts including a hitherto unseen Latin inscription, tells the story of Madā’in Šāliḥ after its annexation in one of the major Western empires. The exhibition of the Arab World Institute thus goes further than *Roads of Arabia. Archeology and history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* exhibition - presented at the Louvre Museum in Paris in 2010 and then worldwide afterwards -, in telling in details the long history of al-‘Ulā civilizations, in acting as a call to travel there, and in participating in the worldwide recognition of Madā’in Šāliḥ as one of the most spectacular places in the world.

Conclusion

Western media that cover the tourist development of al-‘Ulā insist on the “sudden opening”⁵ and the “unveiling”⁶ - pun included! - by Saudi Pre-Islamic past suggesting that Saudi Arabia would finally stand out from the traditional religious pattern and willingly omitting Madā’in Šāliḥ’s inscription on UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008 after decades of excavations and publications.

While the scale of RCU projects is innovative, the recognition of the remains of Pre-Islamic Arabia as national heritage is not new in Saudi Arabia. However, the novelty lies in the massive communication strategy on social networks that highly promotes Madā’in Šāliḥ. Images of the Nabataean tombs have been often used to communicate on Saudi Arabian archaeological entities (such as Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage) to promote their activities (excavations, restoration of archaeological and historical sites) and provide potential visitors with practical information (opening hours of museums, educational activities, restoration of archaeological and historical sites).

Madā’in Šāliḥ is largely used as a symbol of archaeological and tourist activities in the announcement of tourist visas delivery (Saudi Commission for

⁵ Shakespeare, N., 2018. Discovering Saudi Arabia’s hidden archaeological treasures. *Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/saudi-arabia-hidden-archaeology-alhijir-petra-charles-doughty-a8373686.html.

⁶ 2018 A Al-Ula, les Saoudiens lèvent le voile sur leur passé préislamique. *L’Express*. https://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/1/culture/a-al-ula-les-saoudiens-levent-le-voile-sur-leur-passe-preislamique_1998989.html.

Tourism and Heritage, 2017a) or the promotion of the diffusion of documentaries on the protection of Saudi archaeological heritage (Saudi Commission for Tourism and Heritage, 2017b). The rock-cut tombs of the accursed Madā'in Šāliḥ bring with each publication hundreds of “likes” and positive comments from Saudi Internet users, making Madā'in Šāliḥ a metonymy of Saudi Arabia's ever renewed attachment to its thousands-year-old heritage.

This media coverage is intensifying with RCU, which uses social networks as powerful means of creating common symbolic, historical and identity representations. On its Twitter account (@RCU_SA), RCU tries to capture Arabic and English speaking users' attention with a massive use of images of al-'Ulā by day and night along with the hashtag #DidYouKnow followed by historical information. Madā'in Šāliḥ is thus highly represented and used to convey its history⁷ as well as messages of openness of the Kingdom mentalities: during 2018 'Aid greetings, Nabataean scripture has been used to wish a nice Ramadan to Muslim believers (Royal Commission for AlUla, 2018b); on International Women's Day on 8 March 2018, the image of a Nabataean coin of Queen Shaqilath II illustrates a message saying she ruled the Nabataean Kingdom along with her husband (Royal Commission for AlUla, 2019). These two examples among many others implicitly advocate for Saudi openness to different cultures and to women's rights during a contrasted period for the Kingdom's internal affairs, and argue for the contemporary use of archaeology to broadcast larger political, economic and societal opinions to attract potential national and foreign investors.

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⁷ The Royal Commission for Al-Ula Governorate (RCU_SA). “#DidYouKnow Al-Hijr, located just outside the Al-Ula Valley, functioned as the Nabataean Kingdom's southern capital from about the 1st century BCE into the 2nd century CE #DiscoverAlUla”, on Twitter (7 August 2018, 12.05pm): https://twitter.com/RCU_SA/status/1026907096628031488

تطوُّر مدائن صالح النبطية (المملكة العربية السعودية) إلى موقع جذب سياحيّ: من الرفض التقليديّ إلى الاعتراف الرسميّ

فرجينيا كاسولا - كوشين

ملخص

جرت في السنوات الأخيرة حفريات أثرية في موقع مدائن صالح الأثريّ المعروف باسم الحجر في شمال غرب السعودية، وحدث فيه تطوير سياحيّ. ورغم أن هذا التطور مألوف جداً في العديد من البلدان فإن فهمه ضمن السياق السعوديّ يتضمّن دراسة عدّة عوامل. وعليه، فسنتقّف الدراسة على التراث الدينيّ المرتبط بالحجر لتحليل تحوّل الموقع النبطيّ إلى علامة بارزة للتراث السعوديّ وإلى موقع جذب سياحيّ مميّز.

الكلمات الدالة: علم الآثار، التراث، مدائن صالح، السعودية، السياحة، المتحف.

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