

How digging into Saudi Arabia's past is helping drive its future

1st Saudi Archaeology Convention a key component of tourism sector growth

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Leading international archaeologists from countries including the UK, Italy, France, Japan and Saudi Arabia are gathering in Riyadh this week to take part in the 1st Saudi Archaeology Convention which will be sharing discoveries that are cementing Saudi Arabia's role as a crossroads and settling point for civilizations throughout history.

The three-day conference (November 7-9) at the King Abdul Aziz Historical Center and National Museum will be opened by HRH Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, the President of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH), who has been responsible for the establishment and growth of Saudi Arabia's nascent tourism and cultural heritage sector.

This includes stewardship of the Kingdom's numerous archaeological sites, and responsibility for a vast array of artefacts discovered across the country dating from prehistoric times right up to the birth of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1930.

The convention will include presentations by researchers leading the many archaeological missions in several regions of the country.

Over the past years discoveries found in Saudi Arabia have had a significant impact on a world scale. For example, 'Green Arabia', a collaborative project between the SCTH and the UK's Oxford University launched in 2012 has conducted extensive research into paleo-climate change. At Mundafan in the Nafud Desert primitive stone cutting tools were found around a lake-bed dating back 80,000-100,000 years. The hypothesis is that migrating animals followed the course of rivers, and early humans followed the herds. This is thought to represent one of the earliest, large-scale migrations out of Africa.

Similarly significant discoveries made at Al Magar to the south of Riyadh have posed intriguing questions about the first domestication of the horse, while recent research along the Arabian Gulf coast by a joint Saudi-French-Dutch mission may have uncovered the site of the 'lost' city of Gerrha, the centre of an Arab kingdom dating from approximately 650BCE to circa 300CE.

The scale and ambition of the convention illustrates the importance of tourism and heritage to the Saudi economy. It has been identified as one of the strategic sectors in the nation's drive to diversify its economy from an over-reliance on oil revenues, as set out in Saudi Vision2030. As well as its economic importance, tourism also answers another central theme

of this transformation – developing an open, vibrant society that is at the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds.

The three-day conference will also include a number of important announcements, educational events, accompanying exhibitions, and the publication of 29 academic papers and books relating to the Kingdom's archaeological riches. Among the topics covered in the forum are prehistoric antiquities, the ancient rock art of Saudi Arabia, historic trade and hajj routes and antiquities from the Islamic era, with workshops discussing the restoration and development of archaeological sites, counterfeiting of antiquities, national identity and heritage, and much more.

Participating experts include Dr Yasha Zhang, professor of the Rock Art Research Association of China; Dr Arnulf Hausleiter, co-director of the Saudi-German excavations at Tayma; Dr Marta Luciani, professor of ancient near eastern archaeology at the University of Vienna, and leader of the Austrian-Saudi mission at Qurayyah, and Dr Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro a leading anthropologist and head of development studies at the University of Islamabad, among many other eminent archaeologists.