

The First Saudi Archaeology Convention

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Incredibly, this event of last year was the first archaeological conference ever held in Saudi Arabia, a country boasting such a spectacular archaeological heritage. This is certainly not a reflection of the amount of work conducted in the field: intensive programs of research, including into rock art, have been ongoing in Saudi Arabia for many decades, for example the work by the Rock Art and Epigraphic Survey of Saudi Arabia since the 1970s. Nor has there been a shortage of collaborative projects with archaeology departments abroad.

The first Saudi Archaeological Convention was held by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) in Riyadh from 7 to 9 November 2017, under the patronage of HRH King Salman bin Abdul Aziz. It was attended by about 500 participants and comprised 25 lecture sessions held in three venues in parallel, in three magnificent lecture halls of the King Abdulaziz Library, Murabba. In all, 114 presentations were given, the majority (79) in Arabic. Impeccable simultaneous translation was provided in all three venues, in both Arabic and English. In addition to the well organised academic sessions, there were seven plenary addresses, including one by HRH Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz. The event was also attended by the Minister of Antiquities of Egypt, the Minister of Culture and Communications of Morocco, the Ministers of Tourism and Antiquities of both Jordan and Palastine, and the Minister of Culture of Yemen, each of whom presented a speech. Moreover, the convention included five workshops, twelve especially assembled exhibitions, and the launching of no less than eight publishing projects, just one of which is to involve 33 books. The workshops addressed topics such as the protection of antiquities (which is generally commendable in the Kingdom); the opportunities of studying archaeology abroad; renovation and modern technologies in archaeology; the importance of photography in documenting archaeology; and the future and job opportunities in cultural heritage.



Figure 1. One of the three parallel sessions of the academic program, First Saudi Archaeology Convention, 7 to 9 November 2017, Riyadh.

The exhibitions associated with the convention were held at the National Museum in Riyadh for 50 days from the date of their launch. They included: Saudi Antiquities Exhibition; Recovered Antiquities Exhibition; Latest Archaeological Discoveries Exhibition; Exhibition of Saudi Archaeological Pioneers' Works; Exhibition of Specialised Books in the Field of Antiquities; Historical Photo Gallery; Kingdom's Kings Caring for National Heritage Exhibition, which was held in collaboration with King Abdul Aziz Dara; Photo exhibition on the restoration of Al Hejaz Railways Station in Al Madinah, which was held in collaboration with Al Turath; Saudi Geological Survey Exhibition; Commemorative Stamp Exhibition; Fine Arts Exhibition; and the Saudi Handicraft Exhibition.

The event's major objective was to document and highlight the efforts exerted by the leadership of the country as well as government agencies and individuals in taking care of the Kingdom's antiquities throughout history; highlighting the Kingdom's historical and cultural depth nationally, regionally and internationally; and highlighting the contributions of the pioneering generation, whether individuals or organisations in the field of antiquities. The forum also aspired to raise national awareness of the country's cultural heritage, and bring about a paradigm shift in public perception. Indeed, there was a deliberate endeavour of presenting the issue of antiquities as a social responsibility.

What was certainly achieved by this conference was a significant gathering of most specialists engaged in the study of the Kingdom's incredible wealth of antiquities, among which its massive body of rock art is a key component. The event demonstrated the vitality of Saudi archaeology and its excellent collaborations with researchers and research agencies abroad. All

the international main players conducting archaeological work in Saudi Arabia seemed to be present, and many of the papers given offered very significant new material. Some memorable examples included a report by palaeontologist Iyad S. Zalmout of the sensational faunal remains from the Nafud desert. Dated by OSL to about 325 ka old, they include a 60% complete skeleton of a large male elephant (*Elaphus recki*), as well as hippo and horse finds. Of considerable importance to world archaeology is the discovery of Acheulian stone tools at sites near the coast of the Red Sea. They include specimens embedded in coral deposits at Wadi Dabsa that are c. 130 ka old. Older still are chert tools

found encased in a lava flow that occurred near Wadi Dhahaban c. 440 ka ago. Provided by Anthony Sinclair, this is welcome new data, in view of the very limited information available about the earliest hominin history of the Arabian Peninsula. It is well-appreciated that the Peninsula plays a pivotal role in understanding the initial dispersion of hominins. And yet, just as in India, the Lower Palaeolithic remains almost unexplored and certainly poorly understood in Saudi Arabia.

Many other such gems were made available at this conference. For instance, there was a very informative presentation by Mahmoud Alshanti about a subject not much considered, the speleology of Saudi Arabia. Michael McDonald gave an inspired paper on the Aramaic inscriptions at Tayma, and there were several other noteworthy presentations by epigraphers. The rock art papers, unfortunately, were not kept together in one session, but were spread over three sessions. They included only summaries of previous work, no new insights — at least none that have not been presented to the readers of this journal before. Noteworthy was the paper given by Majeed Khan who provided a summary of his life's work with the Kingdom's rock art.