



SAUDI ARABIA'S HERITAGE DIMENSION





It is a pleasure to address you this afternoon. Oxford University's association with the study of Arabia, Arabic and Islam goes back a long time. The Seminar for Arabian Studies at Oxford has for many years brought together distinguished international experts on the antiquities of the Arabian Peninsula. Many Saudi academics have participated in these Seminars to great scholarly benefit.

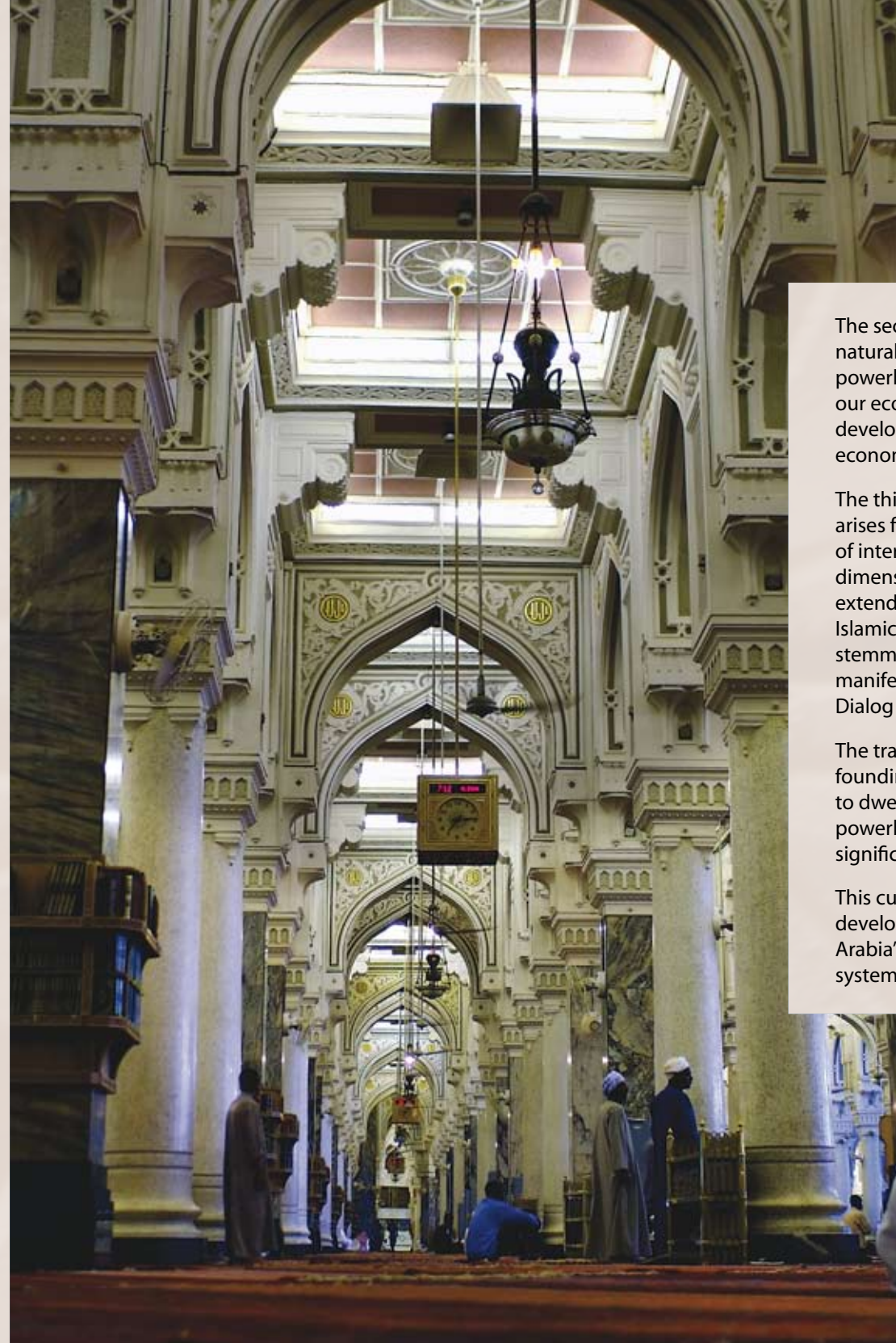
The recently completed Saudi Arabian Crown Prince HRH Prince Sultan Gallery in the Ashmolean Museum is also testimony to the strong links between Saudi Arabia and Oxford, reflecting the shared desire to promote understanding of Islam's culture and heritage.

I am also honoured to have the opportunity to address this venerable forum and humbled by the roster of luminaries who have preceded me here.

Today I would like to speak about the coming of age of Saudi Arabia and to focus on our heritage, which arises as a natural extension of who we are.

I will start by identify four determinants that characterize Saudi Arabia today; they are; Islam, our economic role, our role in the international community nation identity, and our cultural heritage. These four dimensions collectively define us.

Saudi Arabia is the seat of Islam, the home of Makkah and al-Madinah. Islam is the central fact of our society. It is the basis of the unification of Saudi Arabia, as well as the Kingdom's profound responsibilities towards the Islamic world and the rest of humanity.



The second dimension stems from our human and natural resources, which make Saudi Arabia the economic powerhouse it is today; they have enabled us to realise our economic status, allowing us to undertake massive development in our country, to contribute to the world's economy and to meet our international obligations.

The third dimension that defines the Kingdom's character arises from Saudi Arabia's place and contribution in the area of international relations and responsibilities — our political dimension. It has developed and multiplied greatly and now extends far beyond the Kingdom's traditional role in the Islamic and the Arab worlds, providing a balancing effect stemming from our religion and our economic character, and manifesting itself in such undertakings as King Abdallah's Dialog of Civilizations Initiative.

The transformation into modern Saudi Arabia since its founding in 1934 is well-documented, and I do not propose to dwell on its remarkable transition into an economic powerhouse and a nation of major international significance.

This current and far-reaching surge in national development coincides with what can be termed Saudi Arabia's "coming of age" as a major participant in the global system of the early 21st century.

The Holly Mosque in Makkah





To these three dimensions - Islamic, economic and political - there is a role that arises as a natural extension from them as Saudi Arabia finds its place at the centre of the world's affairs. It is little known outside the circle of specialists in the field of our ancient civilization and pre-Islamic and Islamic heritage. This is a defining dimension, an attribute that is a key element in understanding the nature of modern Saudi Arabia and its history, which is preserved, among other treasures, in its antiquities and heritage sites — it is a natural consequence of who we are.

Although the Kingdom is very rich in intangible heritage, I will limit myself to the discussion to what is tangible. Our urban heritage and our antiquities provide continuity in our society, bonding Saudi Arabia's past with its present, and, most importantly, our future. In the most profound sense, our pre-Islamic and Islamic heritages are a key part of our civilization, from the most distant times to the present.

Out of some eight kingdoms that existed in Arabia there arose a cultural and social unity that coalesced into one civilisation. Islam brought with it a system of values that informs everything we do and that characterizes us.

As Chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities and founder of Al-Turath foundation, it is my responsibility to safeguard and show-case the cultural heritage of the Kingdom as one of the country's defining dimensions. Our culture is rich and deserves to be emphasized to both our own people and to the rest of the world. We consider our antiquities and our urban heritage to be national assets and treasures in the same way as any of the other resources with which our country is endowed. Saudi Arabia has a deep sense of its international responsibility to study and protect its national antiquities. Our antiquities are a part of the world's heritage as well as an essential part of Saudi Arabia's national cultural identity.

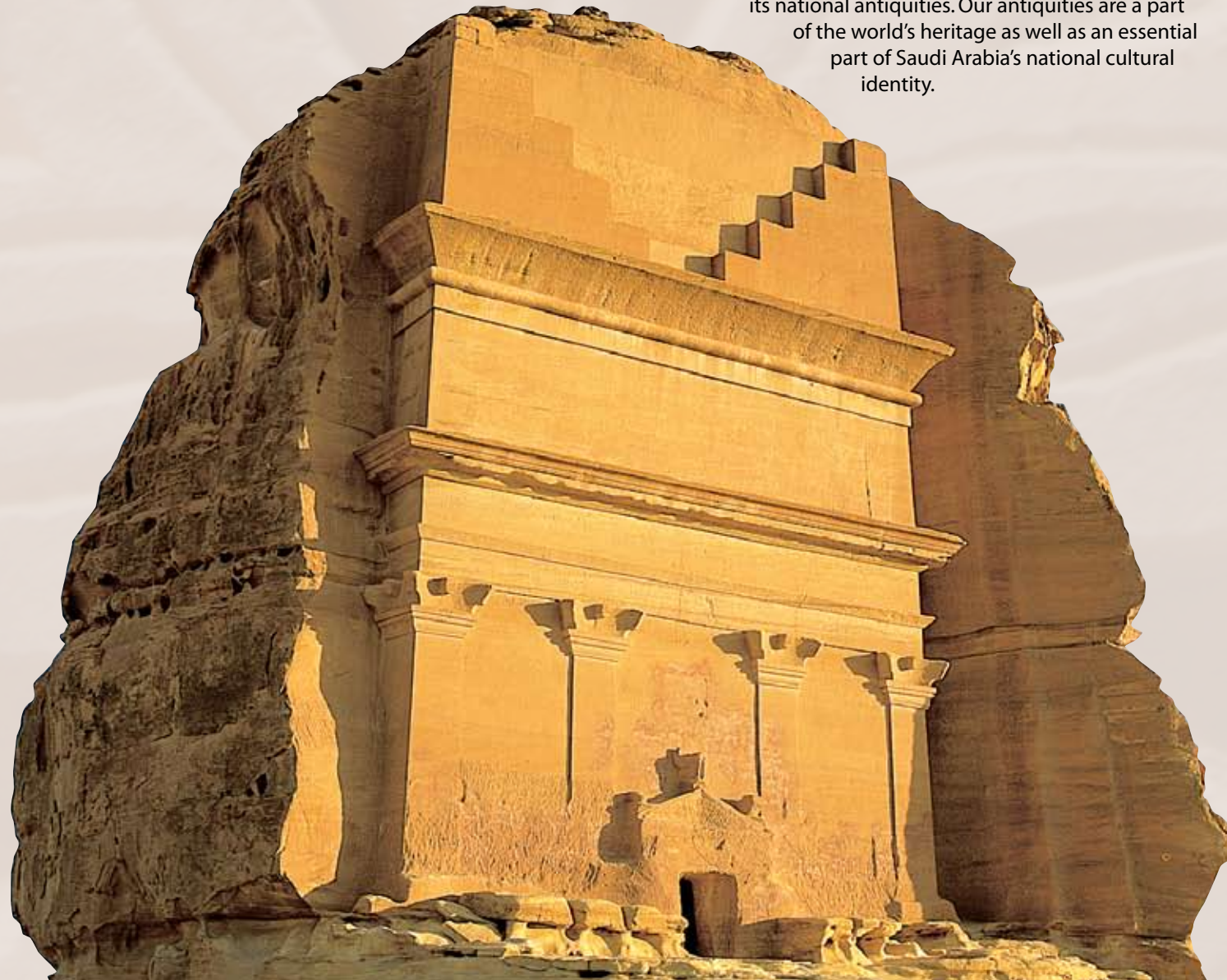
Because this fourth dimension constitutes the cultural essence of Saudi Arabia, I am proud to delineate to you today some aspects of the Kingdom's cultural heritage.

Geographically and historically, Arabia is located at the crossroads of a multitude of civilizations and cultural cross-currents. This setting of our ancient past is reflected in the inter-relationships of Saudi Arabia in the modern globalised world, and (natural extension for the role we are playing today) Said: The point here is that it is the normal and natural role we are reclaiming, which stems from our great heritage as "an already" pre-qualified nation to play a major role in the world affairs.

Contrary to common belief, Arabia has never been completely isolated, and our national antiquities demonstrate this fact, as the most prevalent evidences takes back the human inhabitation of Arabia to one and a half million years before the present. The prehistoric sites are widely spread all over Saudi Arabia, representing the various prehistoric ages. Eventually; Arabia commenced in the fifth millennium BCE, forming long ranged relationships exceeding its boundaries, reaching in later eras Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt and the Mediterranean civilizations. Meanwhile, these activities led to the creation of oases economy and ultimately to the development of major trade centres in Arabia. Whether we look at the monuments associated with the ancient incense trade, or the antiquities that arise from the annual pilgrimage, Saudi Arabia appears always at this crossroads of civilizations. This has been the case for many centuries.

Nowhere is this more evident than at our first UNESCO World Heritage site, the great Nabataean city of Mada'in Salih. No one who has visited this complex of monuments can fail to be impressed. The great tomb facades constitute one of the most remarkable monuments of the ancient world. Mada'in Salih is visible testimony to Saudi Arabia's past as a crossing point. It is also one of the main sites of current archaeological investigations and conservation in the Kingdom.

Al Faried facade at Mada'in Saleh





Another major antiquity at which our archaeologists have worked is the ancient city of Tayma'. Its great wells were built over many centuries as a result of the long development of the Tayma' oasis into a centre of trade. Indeed, so important was Tayma', that for a period in the 6th century BCE it served as the capital of the Babylonian Empire.

In the midst of the Nafud dunes of northern Saudi Arabia is the extraordinary landscape around Jubbah with its many rock engravings, unique in the country. We are in fact contemplating submitting the Jubbah antiquities to UNESCO for consideration as a World Heritage site.



Pottery Vase from Tayma'



Southern Musnad text, inscribed in a bronze plate, from Qaryat Al-Fau

Another remarkable archaeological discovery in Saudi Arabia is the Qaryat al-Fau, excavated over many years by archaeologists from King Saud University. To scholars of Arabian archaeology in the Kingdom and internationally, al-Fau was an entirely unexpected discovery and caused a major re-assessment of Arabian antiquities in the pre-Islamic centuries, during the age of the kingdom of Kindah.

Its large bronze sculptures, its extraordinary series of paintings and its finely built edifice with its bronze inscriptions show the sophistication of the life of the Arabian cities that emerged along the ancient incense routes from Yemen that ran across the Peninsula.

With the coming of Islam, the whole framework of Arabia's relationship with the rest of the world changed. Indeed, it was transformed completely and in spectacular fashion. From being a peninsula on the fringe of the Roman, Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, Arabia became the centre of an ever-growing Islamic world, as it remains today.

Holy Makkah became the direction of prayer and pilgrimage for Muslims who had spread as far as Spain and China within a century of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. It now stands at the centre of the Islamic world. This is a new paragraph. We need to introduce by saying that we care for our Islamic heritage.. " A Royal Proclamation was issued on 21/4/2008 to identify Islamic sites in Makkah and Madinah, to preserve them and to maintain their sanctity. In addition, a program for the rehabilitation of ancient mosques was started in partnership with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and al-Turath foundation.

Islamic Arabia remained a focus of trade and cultural contacts, but there was now an entirely new phenomenon, as a continuous stream of devout Muslim pilgrims flowed in thousands, and eventually millions, to visit the Holy Cities of Islam on Hajj and Umra. Across Arabia, a whole series of towns and routes served the passage of the pilgrims, providing them with water and accommodation in their arduous desert journeys.



Wall painting (fresco) from Al-Fau

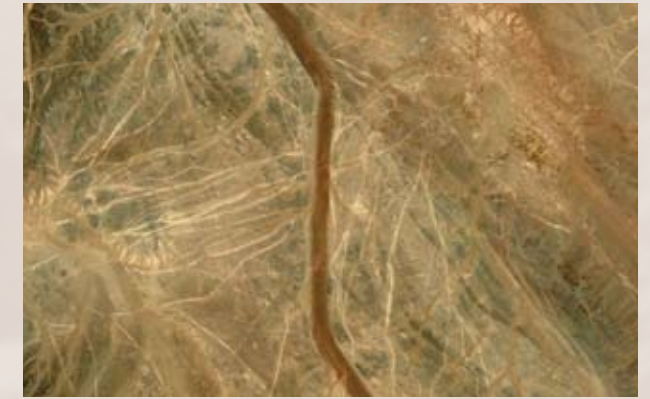
With time, facilities specifically designed to serve the pilgrimage were built along the routes from Egypt, Yemen, Syria and the Islamic east. Some of the most important of Saudi Arabia's antiquities are associated with the pilgrim roads.

The most impressive of these routes is Darb Zubaydah, a great monument to Islamic piety built by the 'Abbasid Khalif, Harun al-Rashid and his wife Zubaydah. As a work of engineering and social organization, Darb Zubaydah is one of the most impressive of Islamic antiquities in Saudi Arabia.

Arabia's history of the written word is an important aspect of our culture. Many people in Arabia's ancient past were literate, as is witnessed by the thousands of inscriptions in ancient languages and in Arabic that are scattered across Saudi Arabia.



Zuhair Engraving



Darb Zubaydah (satellite View)



Old Castel at Al-Dir'iyya

Other antiquities bring us to more recent times. The town of al-Dir'iyya is intimately associated with the unification of Arabia under the first Saudi state (1744). It is one of the largest surviving old towns in the Kingdom that embodies the traditions of desert mud and stone architecture. Al-Dir'iyya is now being restored and renovated by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities and the Riyadh Development Authority, and has been proposed as a world heritage site for 2010. In the meantime a file for Historic Jeddah has been submitted to UNESCO for consideration as a world heritage site.



Under the patronage of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities has very recently (2328- May 2010) organized the First International Conference for Urban Heritage in the Islamic Countries, in which it hosted more than four hundred participants representing about forty countries and international organizations.

In order to assure proper presentation of our precious heritage:

- We created a major plan to develop the National Museum in Riyadh and the other existing museums.

- This year, we have started the construction of five new regional museums, and it will be followed by six more across the country.
- We are working on the transformation of twenty historical palaces and buildings associated with King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud into museums and cultural centres.
- In addition, the preservation and rehabilitation projects of traditional city centres, traditional heritage villages and suqs have commenced across the country.

We are fortunate that many of our old historical villages have escaped destruction, and we are in the process of restoring and preserving these sites.

These projects all have the added benefit of generating employment in the developing tourism sector and engaging local communities in the protection of their heritage. These projects also give a context for the promotion of traditional crafts, another area of living arts we have engaged enthusiastically across the Kingdom.

We have made considerable progress in establishing archives on the history of the Kingdom in recent times. A number of major archives of written materials and photographs have now been collected by Al-Turath for the King Fahad Library. We regard these as being just as important a record of our recent past as the archaeological material that we have retrieved and protected.



It is essential to establish an atmosphere of understanding of our antiquities within the country. To that end, we are starting with the young by working closely with the Ministry of Education to introduce our teachers and their pupils to our great antiquity and built heritage.

We are creating a new awareness among policy makers, opinion leaders and the public at large, of the importance of our antiquities as a major part of Saudi Arabia's cultural identity, and their role in protecting antiquities.

Thanks to the long-term development of archaeology in our universities, we now have the human resources to work effectively and to mutual benefit with international archaeological teams. As a result, fourteen foreign teams are already at work at sites across the country with our own Saudi archaeologists. This would have been beyond our capacities a decade ago.

We recognize our antiquities as a national economic asset of a sustainable tourism industry. We also recognize that sustainable tourism is potentially a significant source of employment for our people, and a major development engine.; therefore, we are working with other ministries to protect our antiquities, enacting laws to protect heritage buildings and antiquities.

Among the highest profile activities we have initiated to showcase antiquities and culture is a series of conferences and national and international exhibitions, of which the first will be the Saudi Archaeology Exhibition at the Louvre in Paris in mid-July 2010.

Thank you.

