Saudi Arabia.. Meeting Place of Civilizations
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Antiquities discovered in the Kingdom demonstrate that the Arabian Peninsula – of which Saudi Arabia occupies two-thirds – is one of the oldest areas of human settlement in the world. Evidence shows that man settled Arabia more than 1.2 million years ago and, beginning in the fifth millennium BCE, the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula had entered into far-reaching relations eventually extending beyond its borders to Mesopotamia, Syria and the civilizations of the Mediterranean region. At the same time, these activities engendered an oasis-based economy ultimately creating large trade centers.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia enjoys an eminent position among the nations of the world. Not only is it the cradle of Islam and the land of the two Holy Mosques, but God has bestowed upon it immense natural and human wealth. Furthermore, the Kingdom plays a major constructive role in international circles. Along with its religious, economic, and political dimensions, the Kingdom also holds an important cultural dimension.
Finally, the site of the ancient al-Maqar civilization, which goes back 9,000 years, was recently discovered. This area was inhabited before the last desertification or during the last period of climate fluctuations. Archaeological materials discovered here demonstrate that the people of al-Maqar had domesticated horses and offer evidence of other domesticated animals, as well as techniques used in hunting and farming.

This discovery confirms that the horse was domesticated within Saudi Arabian territory in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula 9,000 years ago. Previous studies indicate that the horse was first domesticated in Central Asia 5,500 years ago.

Meeting Place of Civilizations

Whether one looks to the antiquities associated with the ancient incense trade, or those connected with the pilgrimage routes, the Arabian Peninsula repeatedly emerges as the meeting place of civilizations over many centuries. The following can be cited as examples:

- Madain Salih, a UNESCO World Heritage Site representing the ancient Nabatean civilization (300 BCE). The facades of its massive tombs stand as some of the most astounding monuments from the ancient world, and provide evidence that this land was a transit point.
- A wall 11 kilometers long surrounded the ancient city of Tayma, whose history stretches back to 1200 BCE. In the 6th century BCE, it was the operational capital of the Babylonian kingdom during the reign of Nabonidus.
- In the center of the sand dunes of the Nafud desert in northern Saudi Arabia is the unique site of Jubbah, which goes back to the Neolithic era, 7,000 years ago. The site is renowned for its unique and prolific rock art. Registration of Jubbah within the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites is currently being studied.
- There are many prehistoric antiquities in Tayma, as well as other artifacts dating back to the Middle and Edomite periods at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Antiquities, including inscriptions from the 6th century BCE as well as other artifacts from the early Islamic era, have been discovered in Tayma. Among the most significant monuments in the region are the huge walls, al-Hamma palace, the Haddawat palace, al-Abiaq palace, and Buqayj palace.
- Thaj, located in eastern Arabia to the west of the city of Jubayl, was a station along the caravan route where passing caravans were supplied with food and water. The site of Thaj includes the remains of a complete city surrounded by walls with four towers. The center of the town is characterized by numerous large tells, and outside of its walls lay as some of the richest ancient mounds. Thaj is also distinguished by its numerous ancient wells. Results of preliminary excavations within the town walls have revealed the main levels of occupation dated between 500 – 300 BCE.
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Funerary Mask, 1st century, Thaj

Fine carvings, Jubbah
Another site that can be dated to the Neolithic period is al-Shuwaymis, an important center of civilization in the north of the Arabian Peninsula. The site contains exquisite rock art depicting life-sized humans and a variety of animals. A magnificent frieze, which is 12 meters long and features figures of humans and animals, was also discovered at the site.

After the appearance of Islam - the last of the revealed religions - in the 6th century CE, facilities were constructed along the length of the routes connecting the city of Makkah al-Mukarramah to Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and the Islamic East. Among the most important Arabian sites associated with these routes is undoubtedly Darb Zubaydah (7th century CE). The Kingdom includes within its territory a wealth of early Arabic inscriptions which provides evidence of the level of learning and the ability to write by the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula.

Another remarkable archeological discovery in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is Qaryat al-Faw (400 – 300 BCE), which has led to the re-evaluation of Arabian archeology in the centuries prior to the rise of Islam. Qaryat al-Faw flourished during the era of the kingdom of Kindah and excavations there have revealed rare bronze sculptures, an exquisite series of fresco paintings, and a massive edifice carved in bronze, all of which reveal the development of life in Arabian cities along the ancient trade routes from Yemen across the Arabian Peninsula.

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Chronology of Successive Civilizations within the Territory of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
1. PREHISTORIC CIVILIZATIONS

The Paleolithic Age
Material evidence discovered up to now proves that Paleolithic settlements existed in the Arabian Peninsula about 1 million years BP. An example is the site of al-Shuwayhiyyah 30 kilometers north of Sakaka al-Jawf, where very primitive stone tools – mostly quartz knives and axes – have been discovered. This is evidence of the site’s connection with East African sites of the pre-Acheulean period.

The Mesolithic Age
Evidence of human habitation sites dating back to the Mesolithic Age 50,000 years BP, such as Bit Hima in Najran Province, has also been found.

The Mousterian Period
Evidence of Mousterian sites has been discovered in most parts of the Kingdom, with numerous locations in the northern, northwestern, central, and southwestern regions, as well as the eastern region of the Kingdom, particularly in the northeastern area of the Empty Quarter around the Yabrin oasis, dating back to 30,000 years BP.

The Neolithic Period
Sites providing evidence of the continuation of human settlements during the Neolithic Period (10,000 years BP) have been discovered. Among the most important of these is al-Thumamah, north of Riyadh. Arrowheads and tools combining function with art were uncovered at al-Thumamah, distinguishing them from Paleolithic and Mesolithic tools in which function predominates.

Physical evidence has also been found confirming the prevailing belief that human communities settled in the Arabian Peninsula 9,000 BP, which depended on breeding mammals and small and medium sized herds. The appearance of human settlements in the Neolithic Period was accompanied by seasonal patterns of living, which included the need to move due to climatic factors. The centers of these settlements were in the eastern, central, northern and western regions and along the numerous valleys of the Arabian Peninsula. It appears from archaeological discoveries that communication existed between these regions, and that the contacts, which developed between Eastern Arabia and Mesopotamia, exercised a significant influence during the Ubaid Period. This may have been due to movements of settlements during the pre-pottery period.

Among the distinguishing features of the Stone Age and its material cultures are the tools manufactured from granite flakes as well as the rock art, which is widespread, especially in the northern and central regions. Perhaps the oldest and largest example of rock art sites are Jubbah, which lies 100 kilometers north of Hail, and al-Shuwaymis, 250 kilometers to its southeast.
The beginning of external relations for the Arabian Peninsula occurred during the Ubaid Period (5400 BCE), when the civilizations of the peninsula first began to extend their influence beyond its borders. During the third millennium BCE, the first cities began to appear in the Arabian Peninsula, along the shores of the Arabian Gulf and along trade routes. This was a result of the earlier contacts with Mesopotamia and the expansion of international relations, which were concentrated along the Gulf trade routes during the fourth millennium BCE. Dilmun was also a center of a flourishing civilization, and it is possible that Sumerian contacts with Dilmun resulted in a cultural transformation. There is evidence to confirm the existence of historical ties between the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia.

These relations represented a high-level system of international trade on two planes: the provision of raw materials such as copper from Oman, and a source of products of the sea as well as agricultural commodities. This relation between the centers of civilization in Arabia and Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley was far-reaching. The ports affiliated with these centers of civilization distributed trade goods and engaged in mercantile contacts between the major centers, such as Tarut Island and the Qatif coast.

The first mercantile network flourished mainly in the eastern, central, and northwestern regions of the Kingdom, particularly during the first millennium BCE. Among the most important mercantile cities during that period were Tayma, Dedan (modern al-Ula), Thaj, Najran, al-Faw, Dumat al-Jandal and Midian.
3. THE AGE OF THE ARABIAN KINGDOMS

Arabs appeared on the stage of world events at the dawning of the first millennium BCE. Subsequent centuries witnessed a whirlwind of events and intertwined conflicts in which the Arabian Peninsula played an important role. The Arabs entered into wars and commerce with their neighbors, as is clear from an Assyrian relief of 650 BCE. Mercantile relations between the Near East, the east coast of Africa, South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula strengthened during the first millennium BCE. Because of its location in the middle of important trade routes, the Arabian Peninsula witnessed the rise of several Arab kingdoms. Among them: Edom, Lihyan and Kindah all established kingdoms along the major terrestrial trade routes in the Arabian Peninsula. In the south rose the kingdoms of Saba, Qataban, Hadramawt, Mahín, and Awân, which engaged in trading spices and other products they produced or imported from India and East Africa. Their kings and queens built cities and extensive irrigation systems for their fields and farms, and directed the incense and aromatic gums trade from the southern kingdoms to the regions of demand such as Iraq, Syria and Egypt.

The Early Arabian Kingdoms

The cities of the earliest Arabian kingdoms began to emerge in different locations on the Arabian Peninsula, occupying strategic places along the caravan routes that joined the peninsula north to south, and east to west. The earliest of these cities, known as the civilization of Midian, appeared during the second millennium BCE in the northwestern area of the peninsula. The second half of the first millennium BCE witnessed competition over control of the caravan trade between the Lihyanites and Tayma. The Lihyanites, whose kingdom lasted from the sixth to the third centuries BCE, left inscriptions, temples, and works of art, which bear witness to their achievements. Some monuments at al-Ula were created by merchants from Ma’in who came from southern Arabia for trade, and had carved their tombs in the rock faces overlooking al-Ula, adorning the most beautiful of them with carvings of lions.

The Middle Arabian Kingdoms

Between the 8th and 4th centuries BCE, large sections of the Arabian population transformed into civilized societies dependent on agriculture and the caravan trade. Flourishing cities arose along the northern caravan routes, such as Tayma, Dumat al-Jandal, and Dedan, in addition to the cities of southern Arabia, whose citizens traded in frankincense and myrrh. The oasis of al-Ula, which was known as Dedan, has a wonderful ancient history as the capital of the Lihyanite kingdom. It flourished as a result of its citizens integrating agriculture into their oasis, and ingenuity into their trade, architecture, sculpture, and writing.

Statue of a man, broken at knee height 4th–3rd centuries BC
Red sandstone 83 cm Al-Ula

Flat, painted bowl First half to mid-1st millennium BC Tayma

Rock-cut tomb of al-Aswad (al-Khurayba sandstone cliffs)
Mercantile Cities
A number of centers of civilization continued to flourish along the Arabian Gulf during the Assyrian, Babylonian, Achaemenid and Parthian eras, from the ninth to the second centuries BCE, and through the era of the successors of Alexander the Great, whose intent was to invade the Arabian Peninsula. The eastern region of the Arabian Peninsula witnessed a period of increasing stability during the Seleucid era. The city of Gerrha is the best example of the high level of prosperity and wealth attained by towns in eastern Arabia during this time, and can be compared to that of certain southern Arabian towns such as Marib.

The centers of the Arabian interior were important outposts along the trading network, which crisscrossed the Peninsula from the southwest to the northeast, ending in southern Mesopotamia. Many mercantile towns situated along the route from a point southeast of Thaj to Qaryat al-Faw and Thaj, also flourished during this period for similar reasons.

Among the most important mercantile towns during the first and second millennia BCE were:
1. The settlement of Arcomy in the center of the Jabal Shammar region.
2. The centers situated along the length of Wadi Sirhan, such as al-Jawf, which exercised its authority over a wide area of central and northern Arabia during the middle of the first millennium BCE.
3. Simultaneously, developments took place that led to the unification of communities on the Najd plateau, along the Tuwayq ridge and in Wadi al-Dawasir. The renowned kingdom of Kindah took the city of Qaryat al-Faw as its trade and political capital.

Age of the Late Arabian Kingdoms
The Arabian Peninsula was affected by the violent conflict, which erupted between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires for control of the ancient world. As a result, the relative stability that had been enjoyed by the Arabian kingdoms dissipated and was replaced by turmoil and chaos.

At the same time, the unity of the kingdom of Kindah in the center of the Arabian Peninsula collapsed as Arabia turned into a platform for violent intertribal strife during the time known as the Jahiliyyah, or the pre-Islamic era.
4. THE JAHILIYAH PERIOD

In the pre-Islamic period, the Arabian Peninsula was home to a variety of religions. Alongside the numerous pagan beliefs centered on the worship of a multiplicity of deities or heavenly bodies such as stars, planets and the sun, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Judaism also appeared in diverse places. Historical sources also mention a group of individuals who were ‘hanifs.’ People in settled communities worshipped the idols of their deities in special buildings, while the nomadic Bedouin carried their gods with them and installed them in special tents in their encampments, which they considered holy places. Diverse places of worship existed in the Arabian Peninsula at this time, including mountaintops, caves, special structures, public squares, tents, and cubic temples.

Shortly before the appearance of Islam, the political situation in the Arabian Peninsula deteriorated as both the kingdoms of Himyar in the south and Kindah in central Arabia disintegrated.

The appearance of the religion of Islam represents a watershed in the history of the Arabian Peninsula.

Through the new religion, the unity of the diverse regions of the Arabian Peninsula was finally achieved; an Islamic State arose in al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, which extended its authority to all areas reached by Islam. Despite the subsequent transfer of the capital of the Islamic state to Syria and then Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula was not isolated from ongoing cultural developments, particularly during the first three Islamic centuries (seventh - ninth centuries CE). Research has demonstrated the existence of cities and sites whose history goes back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, such as Juwatha with its famous mosque in al-Ahsa in eastern Saudi Arabia, and later in the early Islamic period. There are numerous writings and inscriptions from Urayyad and Abbasid times in addition to hundreds of early Islamic sites along the trade and pilgrimage routes. Examples of these are the stations and cisterns to be found all along the pilgrimage route known as Darb Zubaydah, the site of al-Rababah north of al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, and al-Madisayat near the town of al-Ula. In addition, Fayd in Hall Province along Darb Zubaydah, sites along Wadi Hanifah near the city of Riyadh, al-Dur in al-Ahsa, and the port of al-Jar near the town of Yanbu. Many areas of settlement have also been found in the southwestern region of the Arabian Peninsula, especially near old mines in mountainous regions. There are hundreds of ancient sites that include dams, such as the dam of Mu‘awiya in al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, Siyad Dam in al-Taif, and Sadd al-Bint in Khaybar. These are in addition to springs, wells, fortresses and other monuments from the early Islamic period, which demonstrate the continuation of human and cultural activity until the appearance of the First Saudi State in Najd, which extended its hegemony to encompass most of the Arabian Peninsula.
Makkah al-Mukarramah

In the pre-Islamic era, Makkah al-Mukarramah was known by a variety of names, including Bakka and Umm al-Qura. The history of the construction of the Holy Mosque goes back to the late third and early second millenniums BCE, when the Prophet Abraham and his son Ismail built it.

Makkah was founded by Abraham and Ismail in obedience to the order of God, to be a place for His worship, but the Arabian tribes gradually transformed this original monotheism into polytheism, and filled the Haram with their idols. From the time of the Prophet Abraham, the Arabs traveled to Makkah annually from all parts of Arabia to perform the rites of the pilgrimage. Gradually, Makkah developed into a flourishing intellectual, cultural and mercantile center and became famous for its summer and winter caravan journeys to Syria and Yemen.

Al-Madinah al-Munawwarah

Before Islam, Yathrib was an extensive oasis in which there were numerous residential quarters, fortresses and farms, but no centralized city as such. When the Prophet Muhammad emigrated to it, he purchased the site where his camel knelt down – upon the order of God – and thereupon constructed his mosque, which became the center of a new city.

The Prophet’s Mosque in al-Madinah al-Munawwarah occupies a special place among all the mosques of the world, for it is the mosque originally built by the Prophet Muhammad himself. It came to be known as the second of the three Holy Mosques to which Muslims journey, and for which their hearts yearn to visit.

The Prophet’s Mosque was the center of the administration of the early Islamic state and for the teaching of Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs after him, during whose era al-Madinah al-Munawwarah remained the capital.
6. THE RISE OF THE FIRST SAUDI STATE IN AL-DIRIYYA’H AND THE SECOND SAUDI STATE IN RIYADH

At the beginning of the 12th century of the Hijrah (18th century CE), the First Saudi State was founded in al-Diriyya’h by the Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud. His rule began in AH 1139/1726 and developed into a flourishing and stable state.

In AH 1231/1816, Muhammad Ali Pasha, the ruler of Egypt on behalf of the Ottoman Turks, dispatched his son Ibrahim Pasha to Najd in order to destroy the Saudi state. Ibrahim Pasha arrived at al-Diriyya’h with his forces in AH 1233/1818 and proceeded to attack the town. Although its inhabitants resisted with all the means at their disposal, Imam Abdallah Bin Saud was compelled to surrender to avoid further loss of life.

From AH 1238/1820 until AH 1240/1822, the town of Riyadh, by virtue of its excellent defensive capabilities and the destruction that had been inflicted upon al-Diriyya’h, came into prominence. It became the capital of the Second Saudi State under the leadership of Imam Turki Bin Abdallah.
After he left Riyadh in AH 1309/1891, King Abdulaziz lived in the desert for seven months, during which time he learned the prized skills of the Arabian tribes and became acquainted with their way of life. He grew accustomed to bearing the hardship of life in the desert with its unceasing travel on camelback. King Abdulaziz developed his ability to bear hardship and learned patience when confronted with hunger and thirst and a life without any sort of convenience. The lessons he learned served him well when he sought to capture the town of Riyadh. On the morning of Thursday 5 Shawwal AH 1319, (14 January 1902), King Abdulaziz and his companions attacked and captured the Masmak fortress in Riyadh. This was the first step in the recapture of Riyadh, the return of the rule of the Al Saud, and the beginning of the process of the unification of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by King Abdulaziz Bin Abd al-Rahman Al Saud in AH 1351/1932 after he had completed the unification of the Arabian Peninsula from north to south and east to west, with its capital in Riyadh.