

Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula

Debates, Discourses and Practices



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Chapter 9

Archaeological Site Management in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Protection or Isolation?

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Introduction

This chapter¹ reviews the relationship between two actors in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) archaeological heritage management. On the one hand, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA) has been actively involved in managing, protecting and studying the archaeological heritage resources in the KSA since the 1980s, leading to scientific excavations, conferences, development projects and exhibitions. The commission explores the country's historical, cultural, architectural, religious and natural values and accommodates a local interest to preserve archaeological heritage as a sustainable resource (SCTA 2010). On the other hand, there is a local community that is affected by the implementation of these projects on the ground. This research begins with the observation that the non-expert audience in archaeological sites of KSA has little awareness of this resource.

As questions about the heritage of specific regions in KSA during preliminary research were answered by a stark 'is there any?', it is suggested that there is a lack of cooperation and communication involving archaeological sites, the SCTA, and the local community. This chapter therefore focuses on the complicated context in which methodologies are devised for preserving and protecting archaeological heritage sites in the KSA. Efforts have been made to analyse the SCTA's experience in protecting and managing the archaeological sites and how this practice has affected the site and the related community. Discussion focuses on the site of Māda'in Sālih, a UNESCO World Heritage site, to illustrate the unique circumstances that surround the site's history and the sensitive global and regional values at play. It also demonstrates the significant challenges that the SCTA faces on a national and international level. Developing a better understanding of the complex history of the KSA region and appreciation of its value as a source of knowledge faces considerable challenges. This chapter proposes that although an

¹ This chapter presents a section of my PhD research on the management and promotion of archaeological heritage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).