Saudi Arabia's Hidden Past
A Photo Essay

The Jane Taylor collection at the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) and the Al Noor Staff

ACOR works to further "research and publication across disciplines with a special emphasis on archaeology in the region" through support for scholarship, excavation, and restoration. The photo archive can be accessed online at https://acor.digitalrelab.com/index.php. All photos by Jane Taylor, courtesy of the American Center of Oriental Research, Amman. The ACOR Library Photo Archive Project is made possible through an American Overseas Research Centers grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Title VI). All text has been written by the Al Noor Staff.
For this issue’s photo essay, the staff of Al Noor would like to offer you a snapshot of some of Saudi Arabia’s rarely-viewed archaeological wonders. Politics, religion, and the difficulty of obtaining visas have long separated the outside world from ruins as dramatic as Petra but untouched by tourists. Saudi Arabia contains a wealth of untapped cultural and historical riches: British archaeologist Jamie Quartermaine estimates that the desert hides between 6,000 and 10,000 unexcavated sites. These sites include Mada’in Saleh in the region of Al-‘Ula, which contains Nabatean tombs from the first century CE. Traveler and scholar Ibn Battuta visited Mada’in Saleh in the 14th century and English poet and writer Charles Doughty became the first known European to see the tombs in 1876. In the modern period, the sites have been closed except to archaeologists, but Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s "Vision 2030" initiative includes plans to
develop Mada'in Saleh as a cultural destination through the Royal Commission for Al-'Ula. Given the difficulty of accessing Al-'Ula and other archaeological sites in Saudi Arabia, we would like to present a photo essay of images that illustrate the region’s journey through history, beginning with ancient sites from the 6th century BCE and ending with Ottoman forts.

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Left: Two men contemplate the Haddaj well, which was constructed during the 6th century BCE, making it one of the oldest wells in the Arabian peninsula.
Above: A view of the Lion Tombs of Dedan, which are cut into the sheer face of a mountain and date from the 5th century BCE.

Left: A close-up of one of the lions, carved in relief, which adorn the tombs at Dedan.
Above: This tomb at Dedan sports an ornate lintel in the Greco-Roman style, which contains a carved theatrical mask in the pediment.

Left: A view of the old town in Al-‘Ula, which served as the capital of the ancient Dedanite people and later was conquered by the Nabateans.
Right: The minaret of a disused mosque in Al-‘Ula’s old town. Minarets are typically the site of the Muslim call to prayer.

Below: A mosque and other ruins in the ancient city of Dumat al-Jandal, which literally translates to “Dumah of the Stone.” This territory belonged to Dumah, one of the twelve sons of Ishmael, who was Abraham’s first child in both the Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions.
Left: The Diwan, or central governing body and meeting area, of Mada’ın Saleh. The Nabatean empire was formed around the 4th century BCE and conquered by the Romans in 106 CE.

Below: Qasr al Bint, or “The Palace of the Daughter,” towering at 16 meters, is the largest tomb façade at Mada’ın Saleh. In the city once known as Hegra, the Nabatean people carved tombs that remain today as some of the last and best preserved remnants of the past kingdom.
Two portals, adorned with intricate surface details, stand at tomb group C at the south side of Mada'in Saleh. The Nabataean tombs sit at a crossroads of trade and their exterior designs are adorned with a unique variety of languages, scripts, and artistic styles from 1 BCE to 74 CE during which the city of Hegra thrived.
Qasr al-Farid, or “The Lonely Castle” stands by itself as a majestic example of Nabataean architecture in Mada’in Saleh. By chiseling rock from top down, the Nabataean people created this tomb but never finished it, as is shown by the deterioration of detail nearing the base of the structure.
Al-‘Ula oasis in Wadi Al-Qura or “valley of villages” sits 380 km north of Medina. Once an important weigh station and mercantile center, Al-‘Ula is now known for its rock drawings and inscriptions which offer invaluable insight into some of Saudi Arabia’s ancient civilizations.
Left: The ancient capital city of the Tabuk region in northwestern Saudi Arabia housed the Tabuk Castle during the time of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman Al-Qanoni. The purpose of this fortress was to both protect the Tabuk water station and wells, and serve as one of the welcome stations on the Levant-Medina Haj road for pilgrims.

Below: An Ottoman fort and reservoir in Al-‘Ula, near the site of Mada’in Saleh.
Qal’at al-Marid, a castle built in the third century CE in Dumat al-Jandal. The oasis’ position at the intersection of caravan trails connecting Mesopotamia, the Arabian Gulf, and Arabian desert made it an important commercial center along trade routes.