

This Just In From Saudi Arabia: We Have A History

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Ancient Nabatean tomb carved into boulder in Mada'in Saleh
(Saudi Arabia)

Islam has always divided the world, both spatially and temporally, in two. Spatially, the world is divided into Dar al-Islam, where Islam dominates and Muslims rule, and Dar al-Harb, the House of War, where Unbelievers still manage to dominate. Temporally, Muslims see the world as divided into the period after the message of Islam was brought to Muhammad, and the pre-Islamic period, dismissively called the Jahiliyya, or Time of Ignorance, of little worth or interest.

There is plenty of news coming out of Saudi Arabia today that suggests change is in the air. Women can now drive. Cinemas have reopened after decades of being closed. The religious police have been told by the government, that pays their

salaries, that they are to curb their aggressive ways. A Saudi academic, Abdulhameed Hakeem, the head of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Jeddah, has declared on an Arab-language TV station that Jerusalem is as holy to Jews as Mecca and Medina are to Muslims, and called on Arabs to accept Israel's claims, its "historic right," to the city. Crown Prince Muhammad has told Mahmoud Abbas to take whatever deal is offered him and to stop expecting endless Saudi and other Arab support. There are clear signs that Israel and Saudi Arabia have been sharing intelligence about their common enemy, Iran.

But even more surprising than all of these changes is the new attitude of the Saudis to their own past. The Saudis have destroyed mosques, burial sites, homes, and historical locations associated with Muhammad and many of the personalities of early Islamic history. The destruction of these Muslim sites has been relentless. It includes:

Mosques:

The mosque at the grave of Sayyid al-Shuhada' Hamza ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib.

The Mosque of Fatima Zahra.

The Mosque of al-Manaratain.

Mosque and tomb of Sayyid Imam al-Uraidhi ibn Ja'far al-Sadiq

Four mosques at the site of the Battle of the Trench in Medina.

The Mosque of Abu Rasheed.

Salman al-Farsi Mosque, in Medina.

Raj'at ash-Shams Mosque, in Medina.

Cemeteries and tombs:

Jannat al-Baqi in Medina, leveled, still open access for men (since women are advised against visiting cemeteries in Sunni Islam).

Jannat al-Mu'alla, the ancient cemetery at Mecca.

Grave of Hamida al-Barbariyya, the mother of Imam Musa al-Kazim.

Grave of Amina bint Wahb, Muhammad's mother, bulldozed in 1998.

Graves of Banu Hashim in Mecca.

Tombs of Hamza and other casualties of the Battle of Uhud were demolished at Mount Uhud.

Tomb of Eve in Jeddah.

Grave of the father of Muhammad, in Medina.

Buildings:

The house of Mawlid where Muhammad is believed to have been born in 570. Originally turned into a library, it now lies under a rundown building which was built 70 years ago as a compromise after Wahhabi clerics called for it to be demolished.

The house of Khadija, Muhammad's first wife. Muslims believe he received some of the first revelations there. It was also where his children Zainab bint Muhammad, Ruqayyah bint Muhammad, Umm Kulthum bint Muhammad, Fatimah, Qasim and Abd-Allah ibn Muhammad were born. After it was rediscovered during the Haram extensions in 1989, it was covered over and it was made into a library.

A Hilton hotel stands on the site of the house of Islam's first caliph, Abu Bakr.

House of Muhammed in Medina, where he lived after the migration from Mecca.

Dar e Arqam, the first Islamic school where Muhammad taught. It now lies under the extension of the Masjid Alharam of Mecca.

Qubbat' al-Thanaya, the burial site of Muhammed's incisor that was broken in the Battle of Uhud.

Mashrubat Umm Ibrahim, built to mark the location of the house where Muhammad's son, Ibrahim, was born to Mariah.

Dome which served as a canopy over the Well of Zamzam.

Bayt al-Ahzan of Sayyida Fatima, in Medina.

House of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, in Medina.
Mahhalla complex of Banu Hashim, in Mecca.

The Saudis have not even bothered to systematically destroy what remains from pre-Islamic times; they haven't in the past tried to discover, catalogue, or study whatever physically remains from the Time of Ignorance. Their attitude has been one of malign neglect. Let those ancient sites fall into complete ruin, perhaps even be completely forgotten. But all that has apparently changed.

Now comes the announcement that Saudi Arabia is intent on preserving pre-Islamic heritage sites, such as a date palm oasis from the Stone Age, in a break with the austere strain of fundamentalism that has dominated the country for decades. This is part of the kingdom's efforts to open up to the wider world, including preserving, and even repairing, sites that might attract tourists. It is also a sign of a growing nationalism. Not all Saudis want to ignore their pre-Islamic history, but would like to learn what happened in Arabia before Islam. This is a natural human desire: History Exists! Our History Exists! and we want to know about it.

Wahhabis regard the veneration of objects and buildings, especially those from the time of the earliest Islam or even the time predating Islam, as tantamount to idolatry. These sites have been deliberately neglected or subject to outright destruction. But under reforms pushed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has vowed to promote a more moderate form of Islam, the kingdom has allocated \$1 billion to preserve its heritage.

"National heritage wasn't an easy trip, to get people to reflect and go back, especially the antiquities. All the discussions that were about antiquity, this is not Islamic, this is Islamic, this is I think behind us now," said Prince Sultan bin Salman, head of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH).

In other words, the kingdom is now willing to preserve not just Islamic sites (it's too late to save so many of those mosques, cemeteries, and buildings associated with Muhammad and important early Muslims that have been destroyed in Mecca and Medina), but also sites that are pre-Islamic, which would once have been unthinkable. The 62-year-old royal, Prince Sultan bin Salman, a son of the king and an older half-brother of the crown prince, spoke in a recent interview about ongoing cooperation with senior Muslim scholars, including bimonthly discussions with the Grand Mufti, the kingdom's top religious figure, about the latest "discoveries." Talking to the Grand Mufti is a way to help ensure his approval for preserving and promoting a pre-Islamic site for tourists. Recently the natural agricultural oasis of Al-Ahsa, its 25,000 acres containing both fresh- and hot-water springs, and vast tracks of date palms, received such approval. And that approval also extended to the archaeological sites in the oasis that date to the Neolithic period. This June, Al-Ahsa became the country's fifth UNESCO World Heritage site. This is a source of pride for Saudis.

Another UNESCO site, Madain Saleh, is a 2,000-year-old city carved into the rocks of the northern desert by the Nabateans, the pre-Islamic Arab civilisation that also built Petra in neighboring Jordan. It is now the center of a multi-billion dollar tourism project the authorities are developing with French support.

In the past, the Saudis would simply have destroyed such pre-Islamic sites – up to 150 such sites have been destroyed, or neglected them entirely, letting them fall into ruin. For anything dating from the time of Jahiliyya, it was believed, were without value. Visits were discouraged.

But views have changed. Now pre-Islamic sites are being spruced up, and promoted as tourist sites. The canny royals, keeping in mind the "conservatives" who remain unconvinced that pre-Islamic structures deserve attention, have produced

for their benefit an “Islamic” justification for preserving and studying sites that date from the Time of Ignorance. The study of that time, the tourism-minded royals insist, will help both Believers and Infidels to more fully appreciate Islam:

“I believe you cannot understand Islam as a great religion if you are dismissing completely what happened before Islam,” Prince Sultan said.

“That’s why we focused on hundreds of pre-Islamic sites, pre-history because this is a story that cannot be understood without being looked at in its own holistic and complete sense.”

He said up to 150 important sites had been intentionally destroyed or lost to urban development before the government adopted its new policy of protecting pre-Islamic monuments.

Saudi Arabia hopes that finding, studying, and reviving such sites will do two things. First, it will bolster national identity – these are the sites that fill in the pre-Islamic past, supply Saudis with more of the history of their own country, about which they have been ignorant and about which, in an amazing reversal of Jahiliyya-dismissal, they are now encouraged to learn and to celebrate. Will the day come when the Nabataeans be studied with respect in Saudi schools?

Second, the Saudis are now hoping these sites will attract tourists, both local and foreign. They are keenly aware that the world is weaning itself from oil. As electric cars proliferate, as solar and wind take market share away from oil, the Saudis are being forced to think ahead. They have big plans for expanding their tourism. They already accommodate large numbers of religious travelers – 2.35 million are expected to come this year on the hajj. But only 200,000 regular tourists now arrive yearly, most of them from Arab countries. The Saudis promise that they will increase the

tourism budget, up from \$27.9 billion in 2015, to \$46.6 billion in 2020.

If even the Saudis, who have for decades been destroying much of their nation's heritage, can now persuade themselves that what physically remains from the Time of Ignorance is no longer to be despised or ignored but, rather, to be re-incorporated into the national narrative, one that provides them with a source of pride, that should be welcomed. For it is one of the ways that the authority of the most fanatical Muslims, those who will continue to insist that anything, from a single inscription to a Nabatean city, that dates from the time before Islam, is worthless, can be undermined.

His Royal Highness Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz is President for Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage. And it is Tourism and the National Heritage sites (including pre-Islamic sites that have suddenly become cause for celebration rather than destruction), on which that Tourism now relies, that may together loosen, if anything can, the hitherto firm hold of Wahhabism on the most devout of Saudi Arabs. That Wahhabism explains the destruction of so much of Saudi Arabia's past, for the Wahhabis worry about buildings associated with Muhammad, his family, and the earliest Muslims becoming objects of veneration. They also, of course, are uninterested in everything from the Time of Ignorance.

This new way of regarding physical remains from the Jahiliyya, as a source of both national pride and tourist money, may come to naught; the "conservative" clergy, and their "conservative" allies among the royals, are still very powerful. The well-publicized handful of reform-minded, or perhaps more exactly, "change-minded" princes – especially Prince Muhammad bin Salman and Prince Sultan bin Salman – may yet be pushed from power in a palace coup. Not all his fellow princes approve of Prince Muhammad monopolizing the limelight. Al Qaeda has warned the Crown Prince that his reforms are "sinful." But

right now, the more advanced Saudis appear to have chosen to rediscover, study, promote, and honor, their pre-Islamic history. And they, and we, should make the most of it.

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