

“FAITH AND THOUGHT”: CULTURAL HERITAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

Sean Stebbins
Boston College

In his 1976 essay entitled “A Word for the Sake of Art,” Saudi modernist Mohammed al-Saleem declared that culture “is built on foundations of faith and thought,” foundations that usually manifest “in the customs and traditions of nations.”¹ Al-Saleem’s statement reflects the prevailing vision of many 20th century Saudis, who saw the development of a national art scene rooted in cultural heritage as central to forming a distinct Saudi identity. Endemic poverty and tribal antagonism have rendered early attempts at defining what it meant to be “Saudi Arabian” vis-a-vis the nation’s cultural heritage relatively unsuccessful. But the discovery of oil in 1938 and the enormous wealth it generated over the next few decades revived discussions of Saudi cultural identity as the fledgling nation quickly transformed into a regional power. Indeed, the “customs and traditions of nations,” as al-Saleem described them, continue to inform contemporary debates about Saudi cultural heritage, especially given the conservative Kingdom’s decade-long effort to destroy certain cultural sites within and outside its borders. This paper will explore the political, religious, and economic

motivations behind the Saudi campaign to eradicate specific cultural heritage, as well as the reaction to this campaign both domestically and around the globe.

The sheer scale of Saudi Arabia’s damaging campaign cannot be understated. Scholars indicate that over the last 30 years, the Saudi government has destroyed more than 90% of the old centers of Mecca and Medina alone, leveling historic sites like the Ottoman-era Ajyad Fortress, the house of Khadijah, the Prophet’s first wife, and the tomb of his daughter, Fatima.² Officials have even extended the pernicious campaign beyond the Kingdom’s borders, particularly in Yemen, where, as *Retrospect Journal* describes, the Saudi-led bombing campaign against Houthi rebels has included the destruction of “Sana’a old town,” “the Great Dam of Marib,” “700-year-old Sheikh Omar Ali al-Saqaff mosque,” “the Dhamar Regional Museum,” and perhaps even “some of the oldest surviving fragments of the Koran.”³ The presence of both Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage sites on the list of destructions undercuts the claims by some narrow-minded Western critics who cite the cam-

paigned as yet another aspect of some larger East-West divide. Turkey’s staunch criticism of the campaign (especially regarding the Ajyad Fortress’ demolition) as well as that of several Middle Eastern NGOs confirms that the West does not hold a monopoly on criticism of the Saudi campaign.

Importantly, Saudi Arabia has chosen to preserve and build around certain heritage sites while erasing other remnants. For example, government investment has transformed Diriyah—the historic home of the House of Saud (the ruling family for whom the country is named) and seat of the first Saudi dynasty from 1744 to 1818—into a vibrant cultural hub replete with museums, entertainment venues, and art institutions. The Diriyah Gate Project, a \$20 billion investment initiative, seeks to juxtapose discovery of the nation’s tribal past with a litany of “world-class golf courses, picturesque squares, outdoor plazas, and tracks dedicated to horse riders.”⁴ Cast by the Saudi government-sponsored *Arab News* as “the place where the seeds of the great Kingdom were sown,” Diriyah’s status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site underscores the influence of Saudi

state-building interests over debates about the country’s cultural heritage—especially as the Kingdom looks to attract tourists to its shores with exclusive events.⁵ Ultimately, Diriyah’s elevation to a historic site demonstrates the selective nature of the Saudi campaign, one rooted in three distinct goals.

The first and foremost objective—one most often cited by Saudi officials themselves—stems from safety and economic concerns. As noted by Saudi curator Maha al-Senan, the executive director at the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society, the Saudi government “faces [increasing numbers] of Muslims who want to perform Hajj every year” in an ancient space that simply “does not allow for that many people to be there,” a reality that necessitates the expansion of existing sites.⁶ The chaotic crowds—often reaching millions—have caused sporadic injury and fatal crowd surges around the Kaaba, prompting a wave of Saudi investment in the renovation and expansion of the holy sites. *Arab News* reported in 2002 that Saudi Arabia has spent upwards of “\$18.7 billion on the expansion of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet’s Mosque” alone, which shows the enormous financial backing behind expansion projects that would inevitably have contributed to the destruction of ancient buildings.⁷ But safety concerns alone do not explain the scale of the Saudi operation in Mecca and Medina. When

considering, as al-Senan does, that “more than thirty or forty Islamic countries that want to send more people [to perform the Hajj] every year”—and the fact that the Saudi economy heavily relies on its huge but finite oil reserve—Saudi’s economic interests become clear. Just outside the plaza of Kaaba now stands a Kentucky Fried Chicken—a testament to the profit-driven destruction of ancient cultural sites that do not generate the kind of revenue that luxury hotel complexes like Abraj al-Bait do.⁸

The development of a uniform political, and thus cultural identity represents another chief concern of Saudi officials. Al-Senan points to Saudi’s disparate tribal past as a motivating factor behind the preservation of specific cultural sites at the expense of others:

“When [people] talk about Egypt, everyone knows that there were the pyramids. When they talk about Iraq or Mesopotamia, they know there were centuries and centuries of civilizations. But really, in Arabia and Saudi Arabia we had the birth of many civilizations. And we were very rich, but we became a poor nation and then we lost how to preserve what we had.”⁹

In this sense, the Saudi government’s decision to promote new artistic sites at Diriyah is an effort to create a kind of Saudi “pyramids,” a national icon behind which its citizens can rally. Scholar Loring Danforth further

argues that the Saudi government’s historic discovery and subsequent coverup of the Jubail church—a monumental archaeological discovery that confirms a significant Christian presence in the past—highlights the politicization of cultural heritage that dominates the thinking of Saudi officialdom.¹⁰ Whereas other nations in Europe and Asia can easily rely on century-old identities that distinguish their citizens from those of other states, the Kingdom’s comparatively recent creation necessitates the development of not only a unique, but also uniform national identity.

The third factor motivating Saudi destruction of cultural heritage relates to the nation’s longstanding ties to Wahhabi Islam, an austere, fundamentalist version of the faith that decries idolatry and polytheism. In 1925, King Abdulaziz leveled both the al-Mala Cemetery in Mecca and the al-Baqi cemetery in Medina, thus destroying what had been enormously sacred sites (containing many of the Prophet’s ancestors) to many Muslims for centuries. Danforth contends that the Saudi government opposes historical interest in the country’s early Islamic past expressly because “early Islamic shrines or tombs could become sites for the worship of figures other than Allah and in that way encourage the practices of idolatry and polytheism,” a possibility that unsettles the country’s influential clerics.¹¹ Indeed,

researchers Alasdair Brooks and Ruth Young believe that Saudi arguments for improving Hajj infrastructure in Mecca and Medina by revitalizing ancient locations often intertwine with religious concerns, with “sites suffering from the taint of idolatry (as defined by Wahhabis)” usually suffering the worst fate.¹² As *Retrospect Journal* explains, the fact that the destruction of early Islamic heritage extends beyond “sites popular with tourists and pilgrims, where the need for modern facilities could be argued to outweigh the preservation of historic buildings” proves the influence of factors beyond economic ones.¹³

The “Roads of Arabia,” an international exhibition sponsored by the Saudi government, encapsulates the irony of Saudi Arabia’s cultural campaign. According to Danforth, the exhibition ironically uses artifacts taken from the al-Mala cemetery, which was destroyed by King Abdulaziz in 1925, to “assert a living continuity between contemporary Saudi culture and both its pre-Islamic and early Islamic pasts.”¹⁴ This reveals the comical hypocrisy of the Saudi regime, which selectively destroys vestiges of the pre-Saudi society that may undermine its Wahhabi identity.¹⁵ Evidently, a portion of the Saudi officialdom believes that the nomadic society that has continually changed hands among rival imperial powers disrupts the narrative of a continuous Saudi nation-state. The clerics’ effort to prevent domestic tourists from visiting

the ancient Nabatean site Madain Saleh “on the grounds that such activities pose a threat to the absolute monotheism they demand” exposes the hypocrisy of a Saudi government that casts itself as an accepting cultural force.¹⁶

The reaction of Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem to the Kingdom’s restrictive political sphere further contextualizes the campaign targeting much of the country’s early Islamic and non-Islamic cultural heritage. In Gharem’s view, artistic developments amongst other Gulf nations like “the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the Sharjah Biennial, Dubai Art Fair, the Guggenheim and the Louvre in Abu Dhabi” have affected individual Saudis on a personal level, moving the cultural heritage debate into a larger conversation about Saudi art.¹⁷

“Lots of Saudis, unfortunately, focus on the future more than they do on the past,” according to al-Senan, which leads to the destruction of ancient sites in favor of the kinds of modern, luxury cultural experiences (like those in Mecca) that characterize other Gulf states.¹⁸ Gharem, for his part, hopes to bridge the Saudi past with the future through his wildly popular artistic critiques. His criticism of conservative clerical traditions—embodied in a recent sculpture of a stamp inscribed with the words “in accordance with Sharia Law”—reflects the opinion of many Saudis who object to Wahhabist intolerance and the cultural destruction it precip-

itates.¹⁹ The imprisonment of fellow artist and friend Ashraf Fayadh for apostasy (accompanied by a one-time punishment of “800 lashes”) illustrates the tenuous space Gharem occupies, with the artist himself intimately aware of the inherent dangers of his creatively repudiating of the Saudi regime.²⁰

Opponents might contend, as Saudi officials often do, that the country’s attitude regarding cultural heritage represents a continuity from past preservation efforts rather than a departure. Historian F. E. Peters, for example, explains that “every Sunni dynasty that rose to prominence in the Fertile Crescent professed a lively and at times aggressive interest in the Arabian holy places,” interest which naturally included monetary investment.²¹ Salah al-Din’s Ayyubid ancestors in Egypt, for example, “invested heavily in their capital in Cairo but were no less devoted to the holiest place in their empire,” which brought not just religious and political power, but also “considerable economic profit.”²² Scholars Trinidad Rico and Rim Lababidi point out that various regimes have altered the Kaaba throughout Islam’s fourteen centuries of history, including a reconstruction before the early Umayyads.²³ Given these historical precedents, are contemporary Saudi attempts to improve the Hajj experience with shopping centers and hotels really such a departure? Is not the idea of “cultural heritage” one that began in the West, requiring, in



anthropologist Lynn Meskell’s words, “an attitude toward material culture that is also distinctly European in origin?”²⁴ Indeed, the comparatively muted Western reaction to the destructive Saudi campaign (thanks to Saudi Arabia’s oil ties to the United States) undermines its criticisms of cultural destruction elsewhere and weakens its oft-touted role as a third party levying all manners of impartial cultural judgements. Perhaps the Western artistic and historical community, in the words of *Retrospect Journal*, only cares “about the ‘star’ attractions, big name archaeological sites that were popularized by western archaeologists from the time of the Enlightenment”—many of which feature prominently in the British Museum.²⁵ Regardless of the accuracy of these criticisms, western apathy certainly plays an important role in justifying the destruction of cultural heritage by Saudi officials.

In actuality, however, the Saudi campaign represents a pattern of cultural erasure unique to the regime and its set of localized economic, political, and religious motivations. Despite recent liberalizations embodied in figures like Gharem, the Kingdom’s conservative elements still exert enormous influence over its artistic and cultural scene. Danforth points out how the planned Museum of Contemporary Islamic Art “has never opened because of clerical opposition, even though the collection has already been assembled and the building to display

it has already been built,” while a display in the National Museum in Riyadh continues to emphasize “the ignorance and darkness that, from a Wahhabi perspective, [characterizes] everything” associated with the Kingdom’s pre-Islamic past.²⁶ Perhaps Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s personal interest in the arts will forestall future attempts at cultural destruction. But for now, Saudi Arabia’s stifling attempt to hide its rich pre-Islamic past appears likely to continue.

Saudi Arabia’s desire to diversify the country’s economy, formulate a distinctly Saudi national identity, and placate religious fundamentalists have all advanced a 30-year campaign to selectively destroy cultural heritage sites within and outside its borders. This campaign has not only jeopardized the study of the rich pre-Saudi history but also undermined the Kingdom’s aspiration of becoming a regional cultural arbiter. Rather than emphasizing the local origins of national culture, as Mohammed al-Saleem’s 1976 essay suggests, Saudi officials have chosen to not only disregard, but also eliminate cultural sites that conflict with the Kingdom’s strict interpretation of Wahhabi Islam. Despite recent liberalizations owing to its desire to be seen as a global artistic hub, Saudi Arabia’s targeted destruction of heritage sites nevertheless constitutes an unmistakable assault on the “faith and thought” al-Saleem saw as central to any national culture’s enduring legacy.²⁷