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A Conceptual Investigation of the Transformation of AIUla into a Global Tourism Destination: Saudi Arabia Rediscovered Its Pre-Islamic Heritage and Bets on Cultural Diplomacy

Abstract

Located in the Medina region, AIUla is a living museum covering an area of 22,561 km² that includes the 52-hectare ancient city of Hegra (Hijr) — also known today as Mada'in Saleh, the Saudi kingdom's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, listed in 2008. Hegra is best known for its numerous well-preserved tombs. Adopting secondary research as a methodology, this paper seeks to explore different aspects of the strategy to transform the AIUla area into a global cultural, heritage and regenerative tourism destination. Since its establishment in 2017, the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) has pledged to implement a sustainable transformation of the region and an unprecedented valorisation of the pre-Islamic heritage it possesses. Literature on AIUla predating 2017, when the RCU started its activity, is almost non-existent. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to initiate an in-depth and systematic discussion, at academic level, of the strategy to transform AIUla. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, it is safe to assert, on the one hand, that AIUla is being turned into a simultaneously cultural and heritage tourism destination, and on the other, that the rediscovery of a rich pre-Islamic heritage in North Western Arabia is giving Saudi Arabia the ideal vehicle for cultural diplomacy, enabling it to attract foreign investments and tourists, create employment for locals, and diversify its economy. However, the Kingdom still needs to improve its track record socially and politically, to promote an open and dynamic image at global level.

Keywords: *Cultural Tourism, International Tourism, Saudi Arabia, Tourism Development, Tourist Destination*

Jel Classifications: Z32, Z3, O53, Z30

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1. Introduction

The ongoing transformation of AlUla, the ancient Kingdom of Lihyan, into a global tourism destination is a cornerstone of the Saudi Vision 2030's strategy for making the tourism sector the number two industry behind hydrocarbons: "We will create attractions that are of the highest international standards, improve visa issuance procedures for visitors, and prepare and develop our historical and heritage sites" (p.44). Development of the tourism and national heritage sectors is one of the pillars of the National Transformation Program — one of the eleven Vision 2030 Realization Programs (VRPs), designed to translate the goals of the Vision into actions and supported by delivery plans — currently covering the 2021-2025 phase. Marketed as Saudi Arabia's gift to the world, following the substantial U-turn on traditionally strict Saudi visa policies in September 2019, when the Kingdom started issuing tourist e-visas for 49 countries, AlUla has become the country's most popular destination.

Following the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic in March 2020, Saudi Arabia had to scale down its plans and ambitions to achieve global positioning as a world-class tourist hub, but three years later, the country's transition to a "new normal" is based on a strong and renewed commitment to development of the leisure tourism sector.

The topic of AlUla and its sustainable transformation is extremely under-researched at academic level, probably because the transformation began so recently. In the light of the methodology adopted for this research and its limitations, only published literature is examined. As a general introduction to this literature review, mention must be made of the relationship between cultural tourism and heritage tourism. Over the last three decades, scholars have made the point consistently that heritage tourism is a type of cultural tourism targeting the natural and cultural heritage of a destination (Swarbrooke, 1994; Deng et al., 2002; Csapò, 2012, to cite authors from each decade). However, in their pivotal work on cultural tourism, Du Cros and McKercher (2020) state that "cultural tourism is a form of tourism that relies on a destination's cultural heritage assets". In other words, they bring together cultural tourism and heritage tourism in a de facto unique combination (cultural *and* heritage tourism) that goes beyond theoretical distinctions and suggests the central role of heritage per se (tangible and intangible) as the main attraction of tourism destinations. Hence their essential concept of a partnership between tourism and cultural heritage management. Moreover, in Du Cros and McKercher's view, cultural heritage assets are seen as products that can be consumed by tourists; and cultural tourism includes four elements: tourism; use of cultural assets; consumption of experiences and products; the tourist. Du Cros and McKercher's research provides an appropriate perspective from which to consider most of the subjects researched so far by scholarly writings on AlUla. The existing but scarce literature can be divided into two types: technical studies in particularly specialized areas, and very recent scholarly research (papers, dissertations) tackling different aspects of the sustainable transformation of AlUla, in the context of ongoing discussions regarding the creation of the Saudi leisure tourism industry from scratch, and the new interest in cultural heritage — pre-Islamic heritage in particular.

The very first technical studies date back to the first archaeological mission in North Western Arabia, as will be explained in Heading 3. In recent years, following the new interest of the Saudi government in AlUla, scholars have explored a variety of subjects related to the AlUla area, from honeycomb weathering of sandstone outcrops in Mada'in Saleh (Saleh, 2013), to the role of the placemaking approach in the development of a more accessible AlUla Old Town (Mohamed et al., 2020), and contemporary ceramic designs inspired by Dadanitic inscriptions (Turkestani et al., 2023). In the field of archaeology, recently published research includes the preliminary findings of excavation campaigns conducted by international teams (the most important being those of Thomas et al., 2021; Dalton et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2023), inscriptions (Al Theeb et al., 2022, Nehmé, 2022), and long-term archaeological projects (Charloux et al., 2022; Gandreau et al., 2023).

When evaluating the opportunities and challenges linked to the sustainable transformation of the AIUla area, published scholarly research will generally include analysis of tourism-related issues pertaining to the majestic Mada'in Saleh site.

If Saudi Arabia is a “pioneer” in the Arabian Peninsula where sustainable heritage preservation is concerned (Mazzetto, 2022), its efforts to become established as a unique cultural heritage hub in the Arabian Peninsula — competing with neighbouring countries to attract tourists (Al-Zo'by, 2019; Mirgani, 2017; Saleh et al., 2021; Zaidan, 2019, among others) — rely at present on a massive communication strategy (Cassola-Cochin, 2020), spearheaded by beautiful images of Mada'in Saleh's Nabataean carved tombs. But there is more to this strategy than mere images.

Investments and initiatives of the Saudi government to develop AIUla and its pre-Islamic heritage have been impressive, implementing the mandate of Saudi Vision 2030 for economic diversification through tourism. However, the typical thrust of current research is that cultural and heritage tourism appears to be or indeed ought to be the target, rather than mass tourism. The transition from traditional rejection of mass international tourism to official recognition of the added value attached to transformation of the AIUla area into a tourist attraction (Cassola-Cochin, 2020) does not come about without concerns and fears expressed by locals. After highlighting that the topic of cultural tourism in Saudi Arabia is under-researched, Alhomaïd (2021) examines the application of sustainable marketing principles, relying in particular on the work of Chhabra (2009, 2010) and Kotler et al. (2010), to heritage tourism in Saudi Arabia. In this context, the opinions of the inhabitants of AIUla become important if they are to be actively involved in and benefit from the transformation of the area. According to Alhomaïd's research findings, many locals express deep concerns that the authenticity (culture, tradition, religion) of the destination's cultural heritage could be threatened by international non-Muslim tourists, but at the same time they acknowledge the great overall economic potential of the leisure tourism industry, for a country that has long relied almost exclusively on religious tourism (Ekiz et al., 2017). Alahmadi (2021) warns about the risk of commodifying cultural artefacts, places and building in the AIUla area, and especially in Mada'in Saleh, and stresses the desire of locals for tourism to grow “in an ethical way”, coincidentally in keeping with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)'s recent call for tourism ethics (2020a). In another paper, Alahmadi et al. (2022) echo Alhomaïd's work when they analyze effective engagement in the transformation of AIUla and the possible loss of those SME stakeholders who fear cultural erosion caused by the massive influx of international tourists. In this light, the proposition discussed by Ahmed (2017) — namely that raising awareness among young Saudi students of their country's cultural heritage can present a challenge — might appear paradoxical. Despite various difficulties, it is undeniable that since 2016 the Saudi establishment has worked relentlessly to promote the Saudi Islamic, and more recently pre-Islamic, cultural heritage, navigating the Covid19 pandemic with bold ambitions and strong resilience (Wided, 2022). And sustained commitment of the RCU to empower AIUla inhabitants remains tangible (Balkhy, 2021).

Given the lack of any comprehensive and up-to-date academic analysis focusing on the overall strategy to transform AIUla into a global cultural and heritage tourism destination, this paper looks beyond the pervasive marketing of AIUla and seeks to explore the main aspects of such a strategy.

This paper is a theoretical study involving no fieldwork. The methodology adopted is that of secondary research, collecting information from extensive web searches (news articles, academic journals, magazines and periodicals), books, educational institutions (London SOAS) and government records (including digital archives of governmental and non-governmental Saudi agencies). Secondary research usually faces three limitations: dependency on primary research, authenticity of sources, and age of data. These limitations are especially relevant for anyone researching Saudi Arabia and despite the undeniable and noteworthy efforts of the Saudi establishment in recent years to improve the quality and

quantity of available data, sources, and information in general, researching Saudi Arabia still remains a challenging task.

2. Literature Review: AlUla

2.1 *The Beginnings*

Located in the Medina region, 300 km north of Medina and 1,100 km from Riyadh, AlUla is a living museum covering an area of 22,561 km² that includes the 52-hectare ancient city of Hegra (Hijr) — also known today as Mada'in Saleh, the Saudi kingdom's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, listed in 2008, best known for its well-preserved tombs — the main city in the southern part of the Nabataean Kingdom; Dadan (DDN), the ancient capital of the Kingdoms of Dadan and Lihyan; thousands of ancient rock art sites and inscriptions in Jabal Ikmah, an “open-air library”, unofficially known as “the whispering canyons”; and AlUla Old Town, a settlement of hundreds of mud brick houses overlooked by a fort and surrounded by a lush oasis. Outside of the heritage sites, the desert is dotted with sand-drifted canyons and unique rock formations.

Saudi and international scholars believe that much remains unknown about the past of the pre-Islamic Kingdoms of Dadan and Lihyan. The ancient Dadan is mentioned in the Bible as an oasis kingdom whose inhabitants, the Dadanites, traded in saddle blankets. Dadan was built on the site of a Minaean settlement situated at the northern end of the Incense Road, on the main trading route connecting the south of the Arabian Peninsula with Mediterranean countries.

It is probable that the Sheikdom of Dadan developed into the Kingdom of the Banu Lihyan between the fifth and the fourth century BC. Later on, in the first century BC, the Nabateans conquered Hegra and then occupied the Lihyanite capital, Dadan. Under the Nabateans, the trade route was transferred 15 km east of Dadan, which declined thereafter, with Hegra, 18 km north of Dadan, becoming the main centre of the area. In 106 AD the Romans annexed Nabatea, but they never reached Dadan. The latest research suggests that Hegra was the southernmost outpost of the Roman Empire. In the following centuries, AlUla, situated 3 km south-west of the ruins of Dadan, became the chief town of the area (Nasif, 1981).

Al Ansary (1999) explains that the name DDN, as Dadan occurs in many inscriptions and excavations, was derived from the name of the Minaean deity Wud, which means love: “For caravan travellers this love was associated with the moon, their friend and even their deity, and so AlUla became the town of that love”. He further clarifies that in giving the Sheikdom of DDN this name, scholars followed the wording that appears in just one single text, “Mata El Kabeer DDN” (p.191). Based on excavations and inscriptions, we know that Lihyanite contributions to the development of commerce, writing, arts and architecture were prodigious, to the point that during the centuries when the Kingdom of Lihyan was at its most flourishing, the Gulf of Aqaba was called the Gulf of Lihyan (p.195).

Nasif (1981) highlights that, although the first European ever to visit these parts was Charles Doughty in 1876, the first and most detailed study of the AlUla area was made by the French Dominican fathers Jaussen and Savignac who visited the area three times between 1907 and 1910 and left a meticulous documentation of the tombs and inscriptions of Hegra. After the establishment of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, there was no further scholarly activity in AlUla following the expeditions of Jaussen and Savignac until the 1960s. The Winnet and Reed mission in 1962, from the University of Toronto, was the first of several expeditions made subsequently by international scholars.

Al Theeb (1989) relates that, under the umbrella of a comprehensive program of archaeological research launched in 1975 by the Department of Antiquities and Museums of the Saudi Ministry of Education, missions were sent to North Western Arabia — and to the AlUla area in particular — in the 1970s and 1980s, and Saudi scholars and archaeologists published the results of their research (pp.6-9). By the late 1990s, it was felt that the outlines

of the history of Hijaz were still far from clear, and that future missions to the area would hold immense promise (Bowersock, 1996).

2.2 Re-Discovering AlUla

Since its creation in 2000, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Heritage (SCTH) has been charged with the task of developing the tourism sector across all regions of Saudi Arabia. Over the last decade, there have been several announcements of substantial investments for the transformation of AlUla into a world-class cultural tourism destination. In addition, there are two universities in AlUla — Taibah university, AlUla branch, and King Saud university, AlUla branch — and a technical college.

In the early 2000s, a French mission started excavations in Hegra (Mada'in Saleh), thus reviving a cultural partnership that can be seen as having begun with Jaussen and Savignac. The partnership was made official in April 2018, when MbS and Macron signed an agreement of cooperation in Paris, consisting basically of multiple agreements between the two ministries of culture, academic institutions, management consultants and heritage organizations. Saudi Arabia joined hands with France to pursue a sustainable development of AlUla (Arab News, April 12, 2018), preserving its cultural and natural heritage, and pledging to ensure that the growth of tourism would not affect the preservation of archaeological sites. However, it was later acknowledged by Saudi officials that the opening of the Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi had been a factor in the agreement, as Saudi Arabia was keen to emulate its neighbouring country in drawing on successful French expertise. Ten years earlier, in 2008, Hegra had become the first Saudi location to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Following the ambitious commitment to develop leisure tourism in Saudi Arabia as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 comprehensive strategy for economic diversification, launched in April 2016, the creation of the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) by royal decree in July 2017, chaired by MbS, had the stated aim of protecting and safeguarding AlUla, and implementing a sensitive and sustainable transformation of the region. In addition, since its establishment in June 2018, the Ministry of Culture, led by Prince Badr bin Abdullah, has been working tirelessly to turn the Kingdom into a world-class culture hub, with the development of AlUla as one of its cornerstones.

Under RCU sponsorship, the scale of archaeological missions has steadily enlarged. Saudi and international missions — French, British, North American, Australian — have been working in the AlUla area with the aid of the most sophisticated tools now used for preventative surveys: drones, cameras suspended from light aircraft, cutting-edge aerial orthophotography. Aerial archaeology can ensure that no future building work will encroach on archaeological sites, while subsequent excavations are limited to specific locations (Smith, October 3, 2019).

Over time, AlUla has become a year-round tourist destination, offering a mixture of heritage, nature, arts, culture and adventure tours. There is something for men, women and children of all ages at the AlUla Moments: Winter at Tantora, Azimuth, Ancient Kingdoms Festival and AlUla Wellness Festival.

Designed by Milan-based Italian architects Giò Forma, Maraya is the world's largest mirrored building, which rises from the sand of Ashar Valley like a mirage. The perfect modern ode to the past, Maraya has become the centrepiece of AlUla's growing cultural scene. It is a fully functioning multi-purpose venue: besides hosting very exclusive events and performances, it welcomes all types of occasions, from business meetings and congresses to incentives and weddings.

In February 2019, during a lavish ceremony held in the Maraya Hall, MbS launched two mega tourism projects for AlUla: a 925-km² nature reserve for the restoration of the ecosystem and the resettlement of indigenous species in the region — including the establishment of a Global Fund for protection and reproduction of the Arabian leopard and

cooperation with international funds and expertise in the fields of conservation of endangered species, and safeguarding of the natural environment — and the development of vegetation; and a resort designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel to be completed by 2024, within the nature reserve. Both the reserve and the resort take their name, Sharaan, from the surrounding canyon with its ancient rock formations (Arab News, February 10, 2019). With the endorsement of the Crown Prince, Al Ula turned the page, and a global destiny came into sight.

2.3 History Matters, Infrastructures And Logistics Matter Too

In a very rare Zoom interview granted to this writer in January 2022, the leading Saudi expert on AIUla, a seasoned archaeologist and accomplished interpreter of ancient Nabataean and Aramaic inscriptions in North Western Arabia, described AIUla as a truly unique place in the Arabian Peninsula. In particular, he highlighted the beauty of the mountains in the AIUla and Tabuk area and the very pleasant climate of the area for most of the year, with the obvious exception of the summer. He also remarked how extremely interesting it is to look in depth at the original inhabitants of AIUla, the Lihyan people. Their salient feature was a very open-minded attitude to all aspects of everyday life, including religion, especially when compared to contemporary inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. Even today, he said, the people of AIUla are well known for their openness. He recalled what Nasif wrote and is seldom reported: in his capacity as the governor of Riyadh (1963-2011), when asked where he would like to live other than in his ancestral hometown, Riyadh, King Salman would answer “AIUla”. Apparently the keen interest of the Saudi rulers in AIUla comfortably predates Saudi Vision 2030.

After Prince Faisal bin Salman, “a keen architectural conservationist” (Somers Cocks, March 8, 2018), was appointed governor of the Medina province in 2013, he granted a number of permits to visit Hegra, when the magnificent site was inaccessible to tourists. Two reports of Western visitors to Hegra in 2013 are especially evocative.

Virginia Forbes (March 3, 2013), former director of the London-based Arab British Centre, describes her “wonderful feeling of exploration of the unknown” at the sight of the monumental tombs in Hegra, and the silence of the surrounding desert landscape: “No tourist disturbed the peace, and no litter disturbed the beauty...and that was a glorious feeling in this century of mass tourism”.

In the same vein, Anna Somers Cocks writes that after travelling many miles in the desert, suddenly she spotted the tombs with their classical pediments and the eagles of Rome: “It was a shock and unexpectedly moving to see our world, preserved in stone so deep into Arabia and the heartland of Islam”. She adds that the Saudi guide wore a fine white Givenchy headdress that he had bought in London while doing a course in tourism studies. “So the movement to open up tourism predates MbS”, she comments.

At present, to understand and find out more about the ongoing transformation of AIUla, the main sources are first and foremost the RCU website, and its social media coverage, the very informative and helpful AIUla website, and its social media coverage, but also the Saudi Tourism Authority website, created in 2019 to issue the Saudi tourist e-visa and sell travel and tour packages.

Notwithstanding the intrinsic cultural value of AIUla as a living museum, and part of the world heritage, Saudi and international first-hand sources who have recently visited AIUla are unanimous in pointing out that the nascent tourism and hospitality industry in AIUla is seemingly a work in progress, and not a straightforward one. The provision of suitable infrastructures and logistics is needed to make AIUla accessible and fully enjoyable, for domestic and international visitors alike.

It is generally agreed that the hospitality industry comprises four sectors: entertainment/recreation; the food and beverage industry; the hotel industry

(accommodation); and travel & tourism (Andrews, 2007). So what is the state of these four sectors in AIUla?

Entertainment/Recreation: AIUla has become a year-round tourist destination offering entertainment opportunities that cater for all tastes, ages and budgets. Locals and residents qualify for a discount on ticket prices. It is far cheaper to join a two-hour guided tour of Hegra (from SAR 95, by bus — whereas the ticket price is SAR 700 if the ride is a vintage Land Rover) than to take a 30-minute helicopter tour (SAR 750). Tourists can walk through the 3-km oasis heritage trail (SAR35), join the one-hour AIUla Old Town guided walking tour (SAR70), or opt for a stargazing tour inclusive of moonlit dinner (SAR330). Sports lovers can explore the zipline experience or rock climbing (SAR180 and SAR120 respectively), but also the more expensive 60-minute buggy tours (from SAR 400), among several other challenging outdoor activities.

Food and Beverage: food features in most of the AIUla entertainment packages. At the time of writing this paper (June 2023), according to the official website there are three different dining options available: high-end, high priced menus at landmark locations (fine dining), less expensive restaurants (casual eats), and coffee shops or bakeries, many located in the AIUla Old Town main street (cafes).

Accommodation: tourists can choose where to stay from a variety of options, including rented apartments and houses/villas, managed by Gather Reservations. Moreover, four luxury albeit eco-friendly resorts are fully operational, welcoming international and domestic tourists alike: Habitas AIUla accommodates its guests in 96 villas, at prices starting from SAR2,250. Its spaces are constructed from ethically-sourced organic materials. Shaden Resort has deluxe villas and rooms, and a royal suite, but prices are available only on request. The Sahary AIUla Resort has 80 spacious rooms and suites, but online booking is not available. Banyan Tree, featuring naturally luxurious and ecologically sensitive hospitality, was opened in October 2022, (luxury tented pool villas overlooking AIUla's Ashar Valley, minimum size 77 m², online booking available). Finally, guests of the Ashar Tented Resort (44 luxury tents and villas decorated in the traditional Nabataeans patterns and motifs, online booking available), have access to all the superb Banyan Tree facilities.

Travel: AIUla international airport opened to international flights in March 2021, and with the completion of its expansion project, it is now the fifth largest Saudi airport, with a capacity of 400,000 passengers per year (Al Arabiya English, March 5, 2021). Saudia, Flynas and Flydubai operate regional and international flights in and out of AIUla airport.

The Saudi leadership are clearly sparing no efforts to support the four sectors that constitute the backbone of the hospitality industry, with the aim of attracting international tourists to AIUla. And two elements of the strategy for the transformation of AIUla receive special attention from the establishment: *sustainability*, which recently has become an overarching goal for Saudi Arabia: “By preserving our environment and natural resources, we fulfil our Islamic, human and moral duties. Preservation is also our responsibility to future generations and essential to the quality of our daily lives” (Saudi Vision 2030, p.23); and the new importance attached to *pre-Islamic heritage*.

2.4 Sustainability

Since 2017, when the RCU was created, it has been clear that the two goals are to preserve AIUla, but at the same time to maximize its income potential, as the country embarks on a comprehensive strategy for economic diversification. The priority given to sustainability permeates the communication strategy of the Royal Commission for AIUla, which is built around the idea of a responsible development of the AIUla area. The AIUla Masterplan, an “ambitious roadmap to protect, preserve and sustainably rejuvenate AIUla, and form the backbone of the world's largest and oldest cultural landscape”, is committed to achieving a harmonious coexistence between nature and humankind, preservation of the cultural legacy of AIUla for the world, development of opportunities and sustainable economic growth. The

Masterplan aspires to become a global model for responsible development. “Robust” and “resiliency-oriented” policies — zero-carbon strategy coupled with circular economy principles, improved water management, vegetation planting, sustainable agricultural production and off-road policies — are governed by twelve development principles: to develop light touch tourism, enable the local community, incorporate imaginative infrastructure, integrate invisible security, embed resilience, among others.

Revitalise, restore and regenerate are the key words. Work has already begun across all sectors of AIUla’s development: community, arts and culture, heritage and archaeology, nature and wildlife, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, and infrastructures. USD 2 billion have already been invested in development projects, including the expansion of the airport and the iconic Maraya. The total development value of the Masterplan, on full completion in 2035, is estimated at over USD 15 billion. AIUla will be able to welcome 2 million visitors a year by 2035, potentially creating 38,000 new jobs for the local population.

According to RCU CEO, the RCU is committed to creating a regenerated AIUla, a self-sustaining economic eco-system, where indigenous growth is promoted in line with the RCU’s goals of social and natural sustainability. RCU initiatives enable SMEs in AIUla to upskill and harness local talent, natural resources and the cultural landscape. Opportunities include moringa oil; dates and citrus farming; handicrafts, arts and culture; culinary, tourism and hospitality services; history and heritage (GCC Business News, March 29, 2022).

Jean Nouvel And Giò Forma For AIUla: Sustainability is also the guiding principle behind the Jean Nouvel concept designs for the Sharaan resort. With completion expected by 2024 – albeit construction began only in June 2023: see Sleeper, June 14, 2023 – the luxury resort will use emission-free power and set new standards in sustainability; the facilities include 38 suites and a retreat summit centre (the Sharaan International Summit Centre) featuring 13 private pavilions and 2 villas. Basically a resort carved into the rocks and desert of the Sharaan natural reserve, Nouvel’s contextual architecture will use abstraction, sculpting within the landscape itself rather than competing with it. In Nouvel’s words, the project “is celebrating the Nabateans spirit without caricaturing it”, and will not “jeopardise what humanity and time have consecrated” (RCU, October 27, 2020). Since the temperature of the rocks is always at 20 degrees, guests can be welcomed inside without consuming a lot of energy (Arab News, February 11, 2019). The resort will therefore fit in with the wider aim of the Sharaan Nature Reserve, to become a mechanism through which to build relationships at international level, enabling dialogue, collaboration and best practice in the realm of conservation, wildlife protection and environmental restoration.

The spectacular 3-storey multi-purpose theatre, entertainment and conference venue, Maraya — which in Arabic means mirrors, or reflections — forms an integral part of the sustainable approach to the development of AIUla. As Italian visionary architects Giò Forma explain, “the biggest challenge was having to create in a pure and untouched territory... Creating a ‘site specific’ landmark was key”. Hence the idea of the mirror: “If a building cannot compete with the landscape, it should enhance it, thus, the building became a theatre for what surrounds it (which is the real attraction). The silent and respectful mirror cube is a way to create a dialogue between nature, history and the future”. The building is clad with 9,740 m² of mirrors, while indoor facilities include the conference hall, which has a seating capacity of 560 and is 26 metres in height, a roof terrace, a conference centre, exhibition space and a restaurant. Most notably, Maraya Hall has a stage of Grand Theatre proportions, with a giant retractable window of over 800 m² that opens onto the surrounding desert. The architects explain: “From the very beginning we had the idea of bringing the landscape into the theatre, of making the context the stage” (Archello, 2022). “We used the most beautiful material of the area: the image reflecting itself”, because Maraya “is reflected beauty (Isplora, June 10, 2019).

2.5 The Pre-Islamic Heritage

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The Way It Used To Be: A UNESCO co-founder and a member of the Organization since 4 November 1946, Saudi Arabia hosts six UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Mada'in Salih (2008), At-Turaif (2010), Historic Jeddah (2014), Rock Art in the Hail Region (2015), Al-Ahsa Oasis (2018) and the Hima Cultural Area (2021).

For centuries the Saudi establishment conducted a well-documented, systematic destruction of early Islamic heritage sites, especially in the Mecca and Medina areas. The destruction was inspired by the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. From the 18th century onwards, the emphasis placed by Islamic scholar Muhammad al Wahhab on the oneness of God was asserted over polytheism. In former times, people of Najd, as well as the inhabitants of Western Arabia, engaged in practices such as praying to saints, making pilgrimages to tombs and mosques, venerating trees, caves and stones, and using votive and sacrificial offerings. He condemned these acts that he viewed as unfounded superstition leading to polytheism (Chapin Metz, 1992), and the raids and destructions of early Islamic sites that followed down the centuries were driven by the Wahhabi iconoclastic vision. Non-religious sites too, like Ottoman-era mansions, ancient wells and stone bridges, did not escape the increasingly rapid and widespread destruction.

As a result, it is estimated that over 98% of Saudi Arabia's historical and religious sites have been destroyed since 1985, due in part to the Wahhabi doctrine and in part to urban development, especially in the two holy cities, aimed at accommodating an ever-growing number of pilgrims (Power, November 14, 2014). Over time, lists have been made of destroyed sites in Mecca and Medina (Abou-Ragheb, July 12, 2005). Although Mecca has never been a candidate for listing as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is regrettable that Khadija's house has made way for public toilets, and that the Kaaba stands nowadays in the shadow of the Mecca Royal Clock Tower, part of a complex including a five-storey shopping mall, luxury hotels and a multi-storey car park (Wainwright, October 23, 2012).

The Way It Is Now, The Way It Will Be, and Why: But a substantial U-turn in the MbS era has meant that Saudi cultural heritage policies now focus on preserving culture and heritage, and on the protection and enhancement of biodiversity and regenerative tourism, in the AIUla area as well as in many other sites across the Kingdom, most notably in the contexts of the so called giga-projects (Pavan, 2023).

This reversal of intent is exemplified by a national strategy to promote the Saudi heritage, launched in September 2021 by the Heritage Commission on behalf of the Ministry of Culture, which will be implemented through 150 projects. The vision for the strategy is to celebrate Saudi heritage "as a national and global cultural wealth". Its main pillars include protecting and preserving cultural wealth and archaeological sites; promoting research and development of talents specializing in heritage; using the latest digital technologies in the heritage value chain; establishing appropriate rules and regulations and issuing licenses; working extensively with the private sector; providing funding and support for international agencies; and creating public awareness of cultural heritage (Arab News, September 30, 2021).

The change of policy has at least two goals: to create new employment opportunities in the tourism sector — keeping faith with the triple mantra of Saudi Vision 2030: vibrancy, prosperity and ambition, given that the pilgrimage remains the second major source of income, after oil, so massive investments and changes of mindset are needed to build a leisure tourism industry from scratch — and to present an open and dynamic image of the country to international tourists and to the world.

The U-turn is permanent, according to scholars who observe that updated Saudi school textbooks, unlike past editions that did not portray the pre-Islamic era in a positive light, now emphasize continuity with the past by glorifying Islamic and pre-Islamic civilizations. The celebration of sites such as AIUla is unprecedented and demonstrates the interest of the State in incorporating pre-Islamic history into the Saudi national narrative. The role of the royal family is documented in revised textbooks as going back 200 years before the birth of Islam,

doubtless with the aim of justifying the legitimacy of Al Saud rule based on continuity (Alhussein, October 2017, 2019) and tribal allegiances (Feighery, 2017). Similarly, the ever-growing emphasis on Najdi identity and the incorporation of Diriya, the ancestral home of the Al Sauds, into the giga-projects, as well as the establishment in February 2022 of the new Founding Day as a new national holiday, in addition to the National Day on 23 September, confirm how strong economic and political interests figure large as pillars of the new Saudi cultural diplomacy.

2.6 AIUla Goes Global

The creation of a global identity for AIUla as a tourist destination relies on strong international cooperation in different fields: besides architecture (Maraya), accommodation (Jean Nouvel, and more in the future), and conservation (Sharaan nature reserve), archaeological missions and study abroad scholarship programs are especially promising in the medium-long term.

Archaeological Missions: As already mentioned, French, British and North American missions have been active in the AIUla area since the last century, whilst the Saudi school of archaeology has been conducting well-regarded research and excavations since the inception of the university system in the Kingdom in the 1960s. AfAlula, the French Agency for AIUla development was created in July 2018, in the wake of the MbS-Macron agreement of April 2018. According to its website, AfAlula is committed to mobilizing the full breadth of French expertise to support the RCU's transformation project for AIUla in the key fields of cultural engineering, archaeology, architecture and urban planning, agriculture and botany, tourism, education, security, water, and sustainable environmental management. A bilateral meeting in Paris in February 2022 hailed the success of the current French archaeological mission, involving nearly 120 researchers and archaeologists and making the AIUla governorate currently the most important archaeological site in the world (French Ministry of Culture, January 31, 2022). As of 2022 there are, in all, 13 archaeological and conservation project teams from around the world collaborating with Saudi experts in AIUla (PR Newswire, January 10, 2022).

Since 2018, an international survey has been conducted under RCU sponsorship in a "core area" of the AIUla Valley and Khaibar Oasis, led by a team from the University of Western Australia and including teams from King Saud University and Oxford University, among others. Initially, the operation took in an area of 2,800 km² (Oxford Archaeology, June 7, 2018), including prehistoric burial remains, early settlements and extensive rock art, but with the use of satellite imagery, helicopter-based aerial photography, ground surveys and excavations, it spread subsequently to cover an expanse of at least 160,000 km². Preliminary findings published in 2021 and 2022 focus on the existence of over 1,000 funerary avenues called mustatils (from the Arabic word for rectangle), of various typologies, probably dating back to between the 9th and 6th millennium BC, thus predating the first Egyptian pyramids and Stonehenge (Cascone, May 4, 2021), and including another typology of funerary monument, namely pendants, of which there are more than 17,300. In situ faunal remains, uncovered through targeted ground surveys, represent the earliest evidence for a cattle cult in the Arabian Peninsula and suggest that this would indicate a ritual function (Thomas et al., 2021). The presence of mustatils across vast areas and their connections to perennial water sources "are likely the outcome of specific mobility, subsistence and settlement strategies, mediated through the opportunities and limitations of prevailing environmental conditions, and underpinned by complex sociocultural, technological and economic factors" (Dalton et al., 2022). The incredible density of these prehistoric monuments surrounding oases in the region has no equivalent elsewhere, so North-Western Arabia may host the world's oldest ritual landscape (The University of Western Australia, January 14, 2022).

Scholarship Programs: There is a need for Saudi Arabia to diversify its economy, attract foreign investments, expand the private sector and tackle youth unemployment. Also

important is securing the continued support of citizens for the ruling family. Tourism, hospitality and culture afford the ideal tools with which to pursue and achieve all of these objectives.

With the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, it was announced that Saudi Arabia expected to attract 100 million foreign tourists (10% GDP) by 2030. Compared to the 15 million recorded in 2018, this would be a huge increase (the direct contribution of tourism to GDP in 2018 was 3.8%; this figure fell to 1.7% in 2020: GAS, 2022).

In 2021, according to the latest available statistics, 26.8% of the total workforces in tourism-related activities were Saudis: 39.4% females and 60.6% males (GAS, 2023). It is clear that the potential pool of Saudis employable in the tourism sector remains largely untapped.

The nascent leisure tourism industry in Saudi Arabia needs ideally to attract a generation of young Saudis willing to acquire crucially important hospitality-oriented soft skills: customer service, communication, flexibility, language, problem-solving, teamwork, multitasking and cultural awareness being the most important, as well as workforce readiness, technical skills and entrepreneurship. These would be learned in three different settings: home training in local colleges and academies; scholarship programs to study abroad at leading institutions; and in the near future, international campuses in Saudi Arabia itself. This could be seen as a multi-option education and training model (Pavan, 2023).

Regarding scholarship programs, three government entities are the main providers of educational opportunities for young Saudis keen to work in the unfolding AIUla tourism project: the Ministry of Culture, the RCU and the Ministry of Tourism.

In 2019 the Ministry of Culture launched its Culture Scholarship Program, sending Saudi students in their hundreds — the latest batch includes 211 students and was announced in September 2022 (Saudi Gazette, September 5, 2022) — to study archaeology, design, museums, music, theatre, film-making, literature, visual and culinary arts, and other forms of artistic and cultural knowledge, at leading international institutions, with bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees available. The aim of the programs is to prepare readily employable graduates to work in the new tourism and hospitality sectors.

The RCU has set up a scholarship program for young unemployed locals, aimed at building up human capabilities and expertise that meet the vision and objectives of the tourism development plan for AIUla. It is open to 1,000 Saudi male and female students who will be able to study abroad (US, UK, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Italy) in a range of fields related to AIUla's development needs, i.e. tourism, hospitality, history, archaeology, agriculture, arts, museums, environmental sciences, design, urban planning, facilities management, services and communication management. Following successful implementation of the first and second phases of the program in 2018 and 2019, the third phase was launched in December 2021 when Prince Badr announced that 300 students who met the eligibility criteria (Al-Fanar Media, 2022) had been accepted for diploma, bachelor's and master's degree programs at selected foreign institutions. The programme is currently in its fourth phase.

Under the broad title of Tourism Trailblazers, the Ministry of Tourism has recently adopted a strategy to create highly qualified national cadres for the nascent leisure tourism industry. Saudi applicants can choose from twelve Saudi-based training programs and one overseas training program, offered in rotation.

On the subject of Saudi scholarship programs, reference must surely be made to the well-known Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Overseas Scholarship Programme (formerly KASP, the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme). Recent updates of the programme (2022) include a new strategy for educating and training scholarship recipients at foreign universities to meet the needs of national demand originating from the giga projects — the Red Sea Project, Ad Diriyah, Qiddiya, Neom and Roshn being the most important as of Summer 2023 — as well as expanding priority sectors like manufacturing and tourism.

2.7 Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy, a component of public diplomacy and, in a broader perspective, a type of soft power, is definable as the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their people in order to foster mutual understanding (Cummings, 2009). Accordingly, the main goals of cultural diplomacy are to induce foreign audiences to have a positive view of the country's people, culture and policies, and to build greater cooperation among nations. However, cultural diplomacy can also be used to counter hostile propaganda and collect open-source intelligence (Waller, 2009). It can enhance a country's prestige and therefore have an effect on its national security.

While it is agreed that typical tools of cultural diplomacy include the visual arts and exhibitions, language education, study abroad scholarship programs (it is no coincidence that Saudi students on scholarships have been called "ambassadors": Pavan, 2020), broadcasting of news and cultural programs and inter-religious dialogue, among others, Holden (2013) stresses how cultural diplomacy is functional to the promotion of tourism and expansion of trade.

Recent scholarly papers discuss how the Saudi Arabian government is using a variety of cultural diplomacy tools, while at the same time making strenuous efforts to appease public opinion at home and polish its controversial image at international level, seeking to attract foreign investments and international tourists (AlZubaidi et al., 2019; Leigh Thompson, 2020; Dazi-Héni, 2021; Alamer, 2022, among many others). Saudi leaders have audacious aspirations for the tourism sector, striving to make it the number two industry behind hydrocarbons, but they face formidable competition both regionally and globally: "How will the Saudi leadership manage the contradictions inherent in the rapid social change and integration of new tourist appeals with its base in religious tourism?" (Smith Diwan, February 17, 2022). Competition is very strong, especially from neighbouring GCC countries.

For many Western tourists, Saudi Arabia — a secretive Kingdom prior to September 2019 — remains a controversial and complex country to visit, although this is not necessarily a reason to stay away. Justin Francis, co-founder and CEO of Responsible Travel, believes that "it is possible to travel responsibly in destinations with poor ethical records [...] it would be hard to name a single destination with a clean record on the environment, animal welfare, and human rights" (Campbell, January 4, 2022).

Nowadays, tourists who enter Saudi Arabia on a tourist e-visa must comply with the Public Decency Law, which identifies 19 violations punishable by payment of a corresponding fine, and with general rules that can be found on the Saudi Tourism Authority website. In the Saudi Arabia of today, whatever is not explicitly forbidden is allowed, as explained by MbS very clearly in one of his famous interviews (Pavan, 2021). In short, appropriateness is the golden rule, at any time and in any place.

3. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations

This paper has focused on AIUla, the most energetically promoted and marketed of Saudi destinations, and a cornerstone of the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy for making the tourism sector the number two industry behind hydrocarbons. There is a very limited number of scholarly works analyzing different aspects of the development plan for AIUla, concerned typically with the theoretical approach that describes the role of a partnership between tourism and cultural heritage management and unifies the definitions of cultural and heritage tourism. From a closer examination of the historical reasons behind the choice of AIUla, a review of the ongoing initiatives aimed at attracting national and global tourists, and a look at the investments being made to prepare local talent for careers in the tourism industry — all of which are aspects discussed in this paper — there can be little doubt that the Saudi government is sparing no effort to turn AIUla into a world-class cultural and heritage tourism destination.

In 2022, Amr AlMadani, CEO of RCU, said: "The more we learn about the ancient inhabitants of North Western Arabia, the more we are inspired by the way our mission reflects their mindset: they lived in harmony with nature, honored their predecessors, and reached out to the wider world". In effect, the time has come for Riyadh to seek inspiration from Northwestern Arabian civilizations.

Along with the traditional tools (scholarships, financial support worldwide to schools, mosques, book translations, and in recent years, enhancement of inter-religious dialogue), the rediscovery of a rich pre-Islamic heritage in North Western Arabia is providing Saudi Arabia with the ideal vehicle for cultural diplomacy, enabling it to attract foreign investments and tourists, create employment for locals, and diversify its economy.

Promoting the image of Saudi Arabia around the world through the Saudi Tourism Authority is a good strategy, but it cannot be effective in isolation. The strenuous commitment to transform AIUla into an attractive world-class destination for cultural, heritage and regenerative tourism, rather than mass tourism, has been acknowledged at international level (UNWTO, 202b), but this alone is not enough.

Saudi Arabia needs to come to terms with the criticism from the international community concerning what is seen as a disregard for international standards in human rights and a lack of transparency on all levels, as this negative image could potentially limit the number of tourists who wish to explore the Saudi culture and its tangible and intangible heritage. Moreover, the Saudi Cultural Offices at Saudi Embassies around the world should be more actively involved in the promotion of an open and dynamic image and a proactive role for Saudi Arabia in the global arena.

Whilst the present paper achieves its purpose of filling a void in the academic literature on development plans for AIUla, it has certain limitations. Firstly, the secondary research methodology relies ultimately on primary research data reported by various sources cited throughout the text. These sources have been carefully selected, but their complete accuracy could not always be verified. Secondly, this research is based on English language sources only, with the exclusion of sources in Arabic. Thirdly, the constraint factor in the adoption of secondary research: a series of online and telephone interviews conducted between March and June 2022 revealed a widespread reluctance among Western tourists from different countries to discuss their tourism experience in AIUla, and Saudi Arabia in general, with a suitable degree of openness, and this prevented the creation of a reliable sample for a primary research paper. Future research could focus on the success of the sustainability approach applied in the AIUla development strategy, evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the marketing strategy on international tourists, and changes among the inhabitants of AIUla in the perception of international tourists.

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