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Fig. 1 Head of a woman (?)  
Obj. No. 134  
3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD  
Calcite-alabaster  
21 × 13 cm  
Qaryat al-Faw  
Department of Archaeology  
Museum, King Saud University,  
Riyadh, 50F11

## Introduction

### Roads of Arabia – Archaeological Treasures of Saudi Arabia

What is ancient Italian glass doing in the southern Arabian desert, or for that matter, how did Roman hair fashion look under date palms, and why were ancient Egyptian art styles found beside West Iranian ceramics at Arabian caravan stations?

The *'Roads of Arabia'* exhibition impressively demonstrates that trade, religion, and the drive to power, can overcome even the most difficult geographic obstacles. History is shaped by a series of gradual developments, characterised by their interactive nature. Ancient cultures did not evolve *ex nihilo* and exchanges occurred often, even continuously, across very large distances. They brought with them changes of style, technology transfer and innovative impulses. Economic arteries, trade routes and pilgrimage stations conveyed trans-regional developments over the millennia into even the deepest desert regions of the Arabian Peninsula and assumed an important role in Arabia's cultural geography. This archaeological heritage, long blanketed by sandstorms and eradicated from the collective memory, has been the subject of research by Saudi universities and the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), in cooperation with international colleagues. Sensational finds were made and are displayed in the *'Roads of Arabia'* exhibition in Berlin, the only location in Germany, following sojourns in Paris, Barcelona and St. Petersburg.

Trade and pilgrimage routes are topics that permeate the exhibition. It was along these routes that cultural exchange was manifested for more than 7,000 years and local, traditional ways of life competed with trans-regional styles. With the domestication of the dromedary more than 3,000 years ago, long-distance trade became possible even in arid regions, and the demand for south Arabian incense for ritual purposes led to a boom in caravan trading, especially from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards. On the 'Incense Road', along the southern coast and the western flank of the Arabian Peninsula, to Palestine and Syria, and thus into the Mediterranean region, spices, ebony, silk and precious stones from India and Southeast Asia were also traded. Glass, luxurious commodities and devotional objects came from there to the Arabian Peninsula, similar to glazed ceramics from Mesopotamia and western Persia. When, in late Classical times at the latest, and contemporaneous with the rise of Christianity, ritual incense offerings became less and less widespread, the 'Incense Road' lost its importance and thus the urban cultures in the oases along the trade route their economic base. It was not until the rise and spread of Islam from the early 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards that the caravan routes again enjoyed a boom. As the religious centre of the new faith, Muhammad's domain became the destination for the annual pilgrimages (*hajj*), to be completed, if



possible, at least once in a lifetime by faithful Muslims. In place of the branching network of the 'Incense Road', it was now the *hajj* routes that drove trade. Thanks to the rapid advance of Islam to as far afield as Spain, Central Asia and India in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, people and products arrived on the Arabian Peninsula from around the known world.

Inspired by the landscape of Saudi Arabia, the exhibition's architect Youssef El Khoury, a resident of Berlin, has created a fascinating sequence of rooms with abstract, imaginary rock landscapes. Chronologically ordered and structured by location, archaeology is orchestrated as a direct experience in an exhibition landscape, from the earliest hand axes and 6,000 year-old anthropomorphic steles, through ancient bronzes, to the Ottoman Kaaba door and the insignia of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

A main focus of the exhibition lies in the spectacular finds from excavations into pre- and early history, together with ancient records of Arabia. The chronology of the exhibit extends from the oldest period of pre-history, through the beginnings of a sedentary society, up to the development of permanent settlements and the early urban cultures.

Palaeolithic and Neolithic stone tools, and impressive, anthropomorphic, 4<sup>th</sup> Millennium burial steles open the exhibition. Then, Room 2 presents fascinating, 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium chlorite vessels from Tarut (Figs. 2–4), while the German-Saudi excavation at Tayma' (2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> Millennia) forms the focal point of the room. In addition to clarifying the relationships between Arabia and Mesopotamia, we also take a step from the Ancient Orient into the Classical period.

The colossal statues (approx. 4<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC) in Room 3, originally from Dedan/al-'Ula, on the 'Incense Road', capital of the kingdom of Lihyan in north-west Arabia and noted in the Bible, are an additional highlight. The monumental sculptures, probably representing kings or members of the elite, are reminiscent of the colossal Egyptian statues on which they were modelled.

The ancient heritage of Arabia and its burial culture are presented in Room 4, based on the 'Salt cities' of Mada'in Salih/Hegra in the west, Najran in the south (Fig. 5) and Thaj in the east, including precious gold burial offerings for the hereafter. In its function as the second capital of the Nabataeans, Hegra became part

Fig. 2 Vessel  
Obj. No. 58  
Second half 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC  
Chlorite  
H. c. 9.5 cm  
Tarut  
National Museum, Riyadh, 1246

Fig. 3 Cylindrical vessel  
Obj. No. 66  
c. 1300–1000 BC  
Chlorite  
H. 6 cm, diam. 12.5 cm  
Tarut  
National Museum, Riyadh, 175

Fig. 4 Ovoid 'Dilmun' vessel  
Obj. No. 70  
2000–1800 BC  
Pottery with red slip  
H. 24 cm  
Dhahran  
National Museum, Riyadh, 181



Fig. 5  
Flat stone adorned with a snake  
Obj. No. 224  
Orangish-red sandstone  
H. 7 cm, diam. 21 cm  
Najran  
National Museum, Riyadh, 3168



Fig. 6 Incense burner  
Obj. No. 139  
4<sup>th</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BC (?)  
Limestone  
25 × 9 cm  
Qaryat al-Faw  
National Museum, Riyadh, 2184



Fig. 7 Thin-ribbed bowl  
Obj. No. 194  
1<sup>st</sup> century AD  
Blown glass from Italy (?)  
H. 6.5 cm, diam. 9 cm  
Qaryat al-Faw  
Department of Archaeology  
Museum, King Saud University,  
Riyadh, 45F16

of the Roman province of *Arabia Petraea* in 106 AD. The monumental tombs there, hewn from solid rock, are reminiscent of the burial complexes in Petra and have been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2008.

The spectacular finds from Qaryat al-Faw in Room 5, one of southern Arabia's most important trading towns in the pre-Islamic period, are a dedication to Arabia's extensive cultural contacts: bronze deities, wall murals with banqueting scenes and impressive small art artefacts dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC into the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, are witnesses to the well developed culture of ancient Arabia (Figs. 6–8). What is remarkable here is the dearth of written records from the late Classical period until the emergence of Islam.

The early Islamic caravan towns of al-Rabadha and al-Mabiyat are presented in Room 6. At this time the Arab world, with its network of pilgrimage and trade routes, was the centre of cultural exchange between China and the Mediterranean. The fine ceramics, glass (Fig. 9) and metalworks provide evidence of trans-regional trading relations in these, the first centuries of the Islamic period. The large main hall displays objects from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina for the first time in Germany. On display is the more than 3.50 m door of the holy Kaaba which was donated by the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV in the year 1045 of the *Hijra* (i.e. 1635–36 AD). The door is flanked by the original cloth draping, and also with the 6.30 m *kiswa*, or Kaaba drape, kindly loaned to the exhibition by the Saudi ambassador to Berlin.

In their function as guardians of the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina, the rulers of various Muslim dynasties enjoyed enormous prestige during the course of Islamic history. However, this was concomitant with numerous obligations, such as administering the pious charitable foundations (*Waqf/Awqaf al-Haramayn*). Objects from Ottoman period foundations of the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries are shown, including the incense burner commissioned by the mother of one of the sultans. These exhibits are completed by an invoice book 'concerning the outlay and dispatch of certain sums' to Mecca and Medina, from the time of Sultan Ibrahim I (ruled 1640–1648), which is from the collection of the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art.

As the religious centres for Muslims across the entire Islamic world, Mecca and Medina attracted the faithful for centuries. Richly decorated pilgrim books giving descriptions and illustrations of the holy places are witness to this. Many of the



Fig. 8 Box  
Obj. No. 189  
3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD  
Bone  
4.7 × 9 × 5.2 cm  
Qaryat al-Faw  
Department of Archaeology  
Museum, King Saud University,  
Riyadh, 34F17

Fig. 9 Flask  
Obj. No. 265  
8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century  
Free-blown glass  
H. 11.5 cm, diam. max. 8.5 cm  
al-Rabadha  
National Museum, Riyadh, 2293

faithful also sought out the blessing (*baraka*) of the holy cities as their final resting place. Sixteen gravestones from al-Ma'la near Mecca, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, are here erected in an accessible circle to provide witness to this by way of their calligraphic inscriptions.

Finally, the group formed by rooms 8–12 leads the visitor back to the present. First, the discovery and exploration of Arabia detailed in the reports of early European travellers are illuminated using objects and manuscripts from Berlin and Tübingen, including very early representations of the holy cities and the pilgrim caravans. This topic was also taken up in 19<sup>th</sup> century painting (*Orientalism*), as demonstrated by the Wilhelm Gentz painting *Prayer in the Desert (Gebet in der Wüste)*, owned by the Old National Gallery. It has been restored specially for the exhibition and is being shown to the public for the first time in many decades. The 'Mecca Railway', the famous railway line from Damascus to Medina, built with German aid, is also a topic.

Of special interest is the fact that the transfer to Berlin in 1903 of the largest object of Islamic art in any museum worldwide was a by-product of this railway project. The route of the 'first Muslim railway' passed close to the early Islamic desert castle of Mshatta. Due to the theft of stone in the past, the richly decorated façade was in acute danger of being irretrievably destroyed and used as building material. However, a request by Kaiser Wilhelm II addressed to Sultan Abdülhamid II, and the Sultan's generous gift to his ally prevented this. The reconstruction of the Mshatta stones in Berlin in 1904 was also the moment of inception of the Museum of Islamic Art, the organiser of the present exhibition.

As extensive as it is, the curators of this exhibition have acted with restraint and precision. The chronological tour ends with the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the objects loaned by Saudi Arabia, numerous objects from the National Museums in Berlin, the Berlin State Library, the Tübingen University Library, and private lenders make up the more than 400 unique archaeological and cultural history artefacts. Additionally, an important presentation is made in one of the exhibition rooms by other Berlin institutions. The substantial contributions to knowledge made by means of German research projects in Saudi Arabia by the

Fig. 10 Tombstone of al-Ghaliya, daughter of 'Abd al-Jabbar, son of al-'Ala  
Obj. No. 303  
9<sup>th</sup> century  
Basalt  
69 × 45 × 13 cm  
al-Ma'la cemetery, Mecca  
National Museum, Riyadh, 497A

Fig. 11 Reconstruction inscription of the sanctuary of Mecca in the name of the Mamluk Sultan Faraj ibn Barquq  
Obj. No. 245  
c. 804 AH/1402 AD  
Carved marble  
62 × 43.5 × 28.5 cm  
Sanctuary of Mecca  
National Museum, Riyadh, 8

Orient Department at the German Archaeological Institute, the Centre for the Modern Orient, and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences are presented as examples of international scientific cooperation in which these institutions are involved.

The exhibition is organised by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, and the Museum of Islamic Art of the National Museums in Berlin, in cooperation with the Louvre in Paris. The curators of the Paris exhibition were Béatrice André-Salvini and Ali Al-Ghabban. That exhibition's core has been carried over, and both expanded and revised by the Berlin curators Ute Franke, Joachim Gierlich and Stefan Weber.

*Professor Ali Al-Ghabban,*  
*Vice President of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities*  
*Dr. Stefan Weber,*  
*Director of the Museum of Islamic Art, National Museums in Berlin*

