



Treasures Of The Arab World: From The Pyramids To The Desert

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Abstract

The Arab world, a vast geographical expanse often characterized by its arid deserts, holds a subsurface wealth of archaeological and historical treasures that span the entirety of human civilization. This review article synthesizes current archaeological understanding and recent discoveries to trace the arc of human history across this vital region. It begins with the monumental legacy of the Nile, exploring the engineering evolution of Egypt's pyramid fields at Dahshur and Saqqara, before examining the less-traveled Kushite pyramids of Sudan, which challenge the narrative of Egyptian exclusivity in monumental tomb construction. The article then shifts focus to the Arabian Peninsula, where recent excavations are radically reshaping historical narratives. Sites like the AlUla oasis in Saudi Arabia, with its Nabataean capital of Hegra and the open-air library of Jabal Ikma, reveal the peninsula as a vibrant crossroads of ancient trade and culture rather than a peripheral hinterland. Complementary discoveries in Oman and the UAE provide evidence of prehistoric coastal settlements and Iron Age industrial hubs, further illustrating the region's deep and complex history. Finally, the article reviews contemporary preservation efforts, including new UNESCO designations and the launch of the Arab Architectural and Urban Heritage Register by ALECSO. By connecting the Pyramids to the desert, this review demonstrates that the treasures of the Arab world are not static relics but dynamic sites of ongoing discovery that are essential to understanding our shared global heritage.

Keywords: Arab world archaeology; cultural heritage; pyramids; Nabataean; UNESCO.

Introduction

For centuries, the vast landscapes of the Arab world have been perceived through a lens of geographic extremes: the life-giving Nile slicing through the Sahara, the rugged mountains of the Levant, and the endless, seemingly empty deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. This latter image, in particular, has long cast a long shadow over the region's historical narrative, with the peninsula often dismissed as a barren periphery a passive corridor between the great civilizations of Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Mediterranean. However, this perspective is undergoing a profound and radical transformation. The Arab world is, in fact, a rich and complex tapestry of civilizations, a crucible where the foundations of

human society were forged and where empires rose and fell, leaving behind an indelible mark on history.

From the iconic pyramids of Egypt, which have captivated the human imagination for millennia, to the newly unearthed secrets buried deep within the Arabian sands, the region is experiencing a renaissance of discovery. Modern archaeological techniques, coupled with a renewed regional commitment to heritage, are unearthing evidence that fundamentally challenges long-held assumptions. The deserts, it turns out, were not empty; they were crisscrossed by ancient trade routes, dotted with flourishing oases, and home to sophisticated kingdoms that thrived for thousands of years. The coastline, too, holds secrets of prehistoric fishing communities that adapted and flourished at the end of the last Ice Age.

This review article embarks on a journey through this rich heritage, tracing the arc of human history from the monumental architecture of the pharaohs to the bustling trade hubs of the desert. It begins with the legacy of the Nile, exploring the evolution of pyramid-building from the experimental structures at Dahshur to the sacred texts of Saqqara, and then ventures south to Sudan to examine the often-overlooked pyramids of the Kushite kingdom. The core of the article then pivots to the Arabian Peninsula, synthesizing recent discoveries at sites like AlUla, Jabal Ikmah, and Hegra in Saudi Arabia, as well as findings from Oman and the UAE, to reveal a vibrant and interconnected ancient world. Finally, it will review the contemporary initiatives—from UNESCO recognitions to the new Arab Architectural and Urban Heritage Register—that are safeguarding these treasures for future generations. By connecting the Pyramids to the desert, this review aims to present a holistic and updated portrait of a region whose past is as dynamic and essential to human history as its present. As noted by the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), the preservation and documentation of this heritage is not merely an act of looking backward, but a foundational step toward building sustainable and culturally-rooted futures for the Arab world (Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization [ALECSO], 2025).

The Legacy of the Nile: Egypt's Monumental Past

No exploration of Arab treasures would be complete without beginning in Egypt, a land whose very name is synonymous with ancient wonders. The pyramid fields of Memphis, the ancient capital, represent some of the most ambitious architectural projects in human history. The necropolis of Dahshur, located approximately 40 kilometres south of Cairo, is home to two of the oldest, largest, and best-preserved pyramids in Egypt (AZERTAC, 2022). It was here that Pharaoh Snefru, the father of Khufu, pushed the boundaries of royal tomb construction. The Bent Pyramid, with its unique and dramatic change in angle, stands as a testament to an engineering crisis overcome, a transitional form that led directly to the world's first true smooth-sided pyramid, the Red Pyramid (AZERTAC, 2022).

Further north, the vast necropolis of Saqqara offers an even more comprehensive journey through Egyptian history. Serving as the primary burial ground for Memphis for over 2,000 years, Saqqara is a sprawling archaeological zone where more than 70% of the site remains unexcavated, promising future revelations (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt, n.d.). Its crowning glory is the Step Pyramid of Djoser, the oldest stone pyramid in the world. Designed by the visionary architect Imhotep around 4,700 years ago, its stacked mastaba form marks humanity's first foray into monumental stone architecture (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt, n.d.). Saqqara is also home to the Pyramid Texts—the oldest known religious literature in the world—inscribed within the pyramid of King Unas, as well as the mysterious Serapeum, an underground catacomb housing the massive granite sarcophagi of the sacred Apis bulls (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Egypt, n.d.). These sites, from Dahshur to

Saqqara, were collectively recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979 under the name "Memphis and its Necropolis," affirming their universal value (AZERTAC, 2022).

Beyond Egypt: The Kushite Pyramids of Sudan

While Egypt's pyramids are world-famous, they are not the only ones. To the south, in modern-day Sudan, lies the archaeological site of Jebel Barkal, a testament to the powerful Kingdom of Kush. Here, weathered but proud, roughly a dozen pyramids spike upward from the desert floor, standing in the shadow of a 322-foot-tall sacred sandstone butte (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). The Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III first extended his empire to this area around 1450 BC, believing the lone mountain to be the home of the god Amun (Wikipedia contributors, 2026).

Centuries later, the Kushite kings, who would go on to rule Egypt themselves as the 25th Dynasty, restored and expanded the temples and began constructing their own pyramids here. The tradition of building royal Kushite pyramids is believed to have originated with King Piankhy (Piye), and these burial customs endured for almost a thousand years from 700 BC to 350 AD (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). Though less well-known than their Egyptian counterparts, these pyramids are a crucial part of the Arab world's heritage. In fact, approximately 255 pyramids are known to have been constructed by the Nubians—more than double the number constructed in Ancient Egypt—yet sites like Jebel Barkal remain far off the typical tourist track, offering an intimate encounter with a civilization that preserved and adapted Egyptian traditions for its own powerful identity (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). The physical proportions of Nubian pyramids differ markedly from their Egyptian counterparts: they are built of stepped courses of horizontally positioned stone blocks, rise from fairly small foundation footprints, and are inclined at approximately 70°, resulting in tall, narrow structures (Wikipedia contributors, 2026).

The Arabian Peninsula: A Crossroads of Ancient Worlds

For decades, the Arabian Peninsula was considered a peripheral player in ancient history, a barren expanse between more "civilized" neighbors. However, recent and ongoing archaeological work is radically reshaping this view, revealing the peninsula as a vibrant center of human activity, trade, and cultural exchange for thousands of years.

A prime example of this new understanding is the AlUla oasis in northwest Saudi Arabia. Described as a "pearl of the Saudi desert," AlUla is emerging as one of the most significant archaeological landscapes in the world (Savolainen, 2025). The region's history stretches back an astonishing 200,000 years, with the discovery of a massive stone axe in 2023—the largest ever found in the world—suggesting it may have been as lush and agriculturally developed as the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia during the same historical period (Savolainen, 2025). The star attraction is Hegra, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the southernmost capital of the Nabataean civilization, the same people who built Petra in Jordan. Unlike its bustling Jordanian counterpart, Hegra, with its 111 monumental tombs carved into desert rock, has remained largely untouched for centuries, offering a pristine window into the Nabataean world (Savolainen, 2025). The tomb facades reveal the passing of distinct cultural periods: the Humbaba figure points to Mesopotamia, while Egyptian gods appear alongside Greco-Roman Medusa representations (Savolainen, 2025).

The wealth of AlUla, however, extends far beyond Hegra. The site of Jabal Ikma, listed on UNESCO's Memory of the World International Register in 2023, has been described as an open-air library, its canyon walls covered with hundreds of inscriptions in ancient languages like Dadanitic, Aramaic, Safaitic, Minaic, and Nabataean—all of which influenced the development of Arabic (Savolainen, 2025). The majority are in Dadanitic, the language of the long-forgotten kingdoms of Dadan and Lihyan that flourished in the area between 800 and 100 BCE. These texts speak of a multicultural and stable society that thrived on the incense trade routes (Savolainen, 2025). Nearby, the archaeological site of Dadan reveals a powerful local kingdom that flourished before and—according to recent discoveries—concurrently with the Nabataeans, featuring lion-guarded square holes on the mountain face that served as tombs, with the removed stone ingeniously repurposed for the nearby city settlement (Savolainen, 2025). The entire area is a gold mine for archaeologists, with tens of thousands of archaeological features now identified, fundamentally altering our understanding of ancient Middle Eastern history (Savolainen, 2025).

This new narrative of a "Green Arabia" is being reinforced by discoveries across the peninsula. In Oman, a French mission from the "Archaeology of the Arabian Seashores" project, working in cooperation with the Directorate General of Heritage and Tourism in Dhofar Governorate, uncovered evidence of a Paleolithic fishing community at the Natif Cave, dating back to between 10,350 and 10,700 BC (Oman News Agency, 2026). Discovered in 2013 and excavated between 2013 and 2016, the site was revisited in 2024 for further documentation. The finds, which include fish and turtle remains, flint tools, beads, frankincense pebbles, and what is believed to be the oldest rope ever discovered in the world, show that humans were not just surviving but thriving along the Arabian coastline at the end of the last Ice Age, housing sediments from the oldest fishing community in the Arabian Peninsula (Oman News Agency, 2026).

Similarly, excavations at sites like Saruq Al-Hadid in Dubai reveal a different facet of ancient life. Here, during the 2018/2019 excavation season, archaeologists unearthed an "Iron Age Artefacts Hoard" at the SAR.53 site—a collection of 123 artifacts discovered in a circular pit (Al Suwaidi, AL Ali, & Lehner, 2025). The hoard consists mostly of copper alloy bowls, vessels, axes, ladles, and tools, found grouped by type, appearing upside down and showing signs of use and burning. This suggests a complex relationship with material culture, possibly driven by specific ceremonial rituals (Al Suwaidi et al., 2025). Radiocarbon dating places the site within the Iron II Age (8th century BC – 7th century BC), proving that the site was a hub for charcoal production and metalworking. The variety of tools reflects the multifaceted daily life of the inhabitants, while decorative motifs on the artifacts reflect advanced craftsmanship and cultural interactions, linking them to broader regional traditions (Al Suwaidi et al., 2025).

Preserving a Shared Heritage: New Initiatives and Recognitions

The immense cultural and historical value of these sites is now being matched by concerted efforts to preserve and promote them. International bodies like UNESCO, along with regional organizations, are playing a pivotal role. In July 2024, three new Arab sites were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List, showcasing the diversity of the region's heritage.

The Monastery of Saint Hilarion/Tell Umm Amer in Palestine, one of the oldest sites in the Middle East, was inscribed simultaneously on the World Heritage List and on the List of World Heritage in Danger using an emergency procedure due to threats posed by the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip (UNESCO, 2024). Founded by Saint Hilarion, it was home to the first monastic community in the Holy Land and

served as a center for religious, cultural and economic exchanges, illustrating the prosperity of desert monastic sites in the Byzantine period (UNESCO, 2024).

Umm el-Jimal in Jordan, situated 80 km north of Amman, was also recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2024 (Jordan Tourism Board, n.d.). Originally a Nabataean settlement, it later served as a Roman military post and flourished as a Byzantine farming and trading town between the 5th and 7th centuries. The site contains approximately 150 basalt houses, 16 churches, and structures like the Praetorium, Commodus Gate, and the Great Reservoir, all reflecting its rich Roman and Byzantine heritage. Its innovative basalt construction techniques, such as corbelling and interlocking courses, enabled the creation of multi-story, durable structures that have withstood centuries (Jordan Tourism Board, n.d.).

The third site, the Cultural Landscape of the Al-Faw Archaeological Area in Saudi Arabia, was registered as the Kingdom's eighth World Heritage site, meeting a Vision 2030 goal (Saudi Gazette, 2024). Located at the intersection of the Empty Quarter desert and the Tuwaiq mountain range, the site spans 50 km² and contains diverse archaeological evidence dating back to prehistoric times, including nearly 12,000 archaeological remains. Key features include Palaeolithic and Neolithic tools, large tombs with clear formations, an ancient oasis with irrigation systems, the sacred mountain of Khashm Qaryah, rock carvings, forts, caravanserais, and remnants of the ancient city of Qaryat al-Faw, which was abandoned around the 5th century CE (Saudi Gazette, 2024).

This momentum is also reflected in regional cooperation. In November 2025, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) continued its work on the Arab Architectural and Urban Heritage Register, with Jordan's King Abdullah I's Palace being listed during the 27th Arab Conference on Archaeology and Cultural Heritage in the Arab World, held in Doha, Qatar, under the theme "Sustainability of Cultural Heritage: Challenges and Future Strategies" (Jordan News Agency [Petra], 2025). This initiative marks a pivotal moment in formally documenting and protecting cultural properties across the Arab world, providing a crucial framework for acknowledging, safeguarding, and celebrating the architectural treasures that define the identity of the region.

Conclusion

The treasures of the Arab world are as vast and varied as the landscape itself. They span from the engineering marvels of ancient Egypt's pyramids to the rock-cut tombs of the Nabataeans in Saudi Arabia, and from the sacred butte of Jebel Barkal in Sudan to the ancient fishing villages on the coast of Oman. These are not static relics of a distant past; they are active sites of discovery, with every excavation season rewriting history books and deepening our understanding of humanity's shared story. Thanks to modern conservation efforts, international collaboration, and a renewed regional commitment to heritage preservation, these treasures are being safeguarded for the future. As the sands continue to shift, they promise to reveal even more about the civilizations that have made the Arab world a timeless cradle of history and culture.

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