



AlUla, Wonder of Arabia | Rome Exhibition Concept

30 July 2026

Introduction

AIUla: Wonder of Arabia (Rome, 2027) is a flagship cultural diplomatic initiative of the **Royal Commission for AIUla**, developed to showcase how heritage, science, and international partnerships shape AIUla's global presence. Created in partnership with the **Museo Nazionale Romano**, with the support of AFALULA, the French Agency for the development of AIUla, the exhibition will open in the monumental setting of the **Terme di Diocleziano**, affirming a mature and trusted partnership between Saudi Arabia and Italy grounded in shared values of conservation excellence, research leadership, and knowledge exchange. It positions AIUla not only as a place of extraordinary archaeological depth, but as a centre of contemporary heritage expertise and international collaboration.

Within this setting, visitors are welcomed to explore AIUla, a North-West Arabian oasis shaped by more than 7,000 years of human settlement, belief, trade, and creativity. The exhibition presents the material legacy of this landscape while making visible the modern institutional and human partnerships that preserve, study, and reinterpret that legacy today, across key heritage sites including Hegra, Dadan, AIUla Old Town, Tayma and Khaybar, involving both Saudi and international specialists working within a broad framework of partnerships that includes Italian, French and other global institutions.

This edition represents an evolution of the exhibition first presented at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris 2019–20 (110 000 visitors), at the Palace Museum in the Beijing's Forbidden City in 2024 (more than 270,000 visitors) and in a smaller-scale adaptation at the Shang Dynasty Capital Site Museum in China's Henan Province (over 246,000 visitors). This edition moves beyond presentation toward partnership, becoming a statement of shared authorship and enduring cultural connection between Saudi Arabia and Italy.

Partners

**museo
nazionale
romano**



Curatorial Vision

Why AIUla? Why Rome?

These questions open the **AIUla: Wonder of Arabia** exhibition and the visitor journey answers them. The exhibition introduces the cultural landscape of north-west Arabia — a place shaped by water, movement, belief, ingenuity and an unbroken human presence. It is one of the most actively researched landscapes in the world, where new discoveries are continually rewriting what we know, and where an ambitious programme of cultural revival is shaping its future. The AIUla the visitor meets is a place forever being revitalized — this forward-looking spirit runs through the whole exhibition.

The second question — why Rome? — is the exhibition's hook. The connection is older and closer than most visitors will expect, and the setting itself hints at it. The Baths of Diocletian are one of Rome's great monuments to water, engineering and civic life — the very forces that also shaped AIUla — and one of its halls holds first-century monumental Roman tombs, remarkably close in date and purpose to the great tombs of Hegra.

The exhibition unfolds in two movements. Hall X takes visitors back to the beginning, to understand why AIUla matters, while Hall XI delivers the revelation that AIUla and Rome were connected in antiquity — and then carries that ancient encounter forward, to the present and to the future. Three golden threads are woven throughout: **the Incense Road, Women** and the **Italian contribution to living science**.

Interpretive Strategy

Combining a clear visitor route with a layered, thematic structure, the exhibition approach is broadly chronological — beginning, ancient connection, present, future — but it is driven throughout by recurring themes: water, oasis life, writing, belief, trade, power, mobility, memory, conservation and renewal. The journey can be read as a sequence of questions:

- Why is AIUla worth knowing?
- How deep and how sophisticated is its history?
- What was AIUla's connection to Rome?
- How does that connection live on today?
- Where is AIUla heading next?

Narrative Structure — Part 1

An Oasis in Rome

To understand AlUla, the visitor is taken back to where its story begins: its source of life. The first hall opens in a **living oasis** — palms, fields, irrigation, mudbrick architecture, seasonal rhythms and community. This is the first act of reorientation replaces the familiar image of Arabia as empty or static with one of abundance, sophistication and depth.

The oasis is grounded in AlUla's own evidence. Dadanitic inscriptions preserve prayers for seasonal rain, for palm trees and crops, and record the men and women — many owning land in their own right — who shaped the life of the oasis in the first millennium BCE. The palm is an archaeological and social marker, linking ancient inscriptions to agricultural traditions still alive in AlUla today.

After visitors return from the second gallery and slowly make their way back to the oasis on the introduction, they come back to AlUla's present, to better look to the future. In **Shared Endeavours**, the same partnership that conserve AlUla today are helping to shape what it becomes — a destination continually revitalised, its discoveries ongoing, its story deliberately unfinished. What began as an oasis in dialogue with Rome becomes a present-day collaboration and a shared, forward-looking endeavour.



Narrative Structure — Part 2

An Oasis Through Time

Crossing into the second hall, visitors discover AlUla's ancient past, beginning with Hegra and AlUla's place within the Nabataean and Roman worlds. Monumental tombs, inscriptions, elite display and trade networks reveal a Nabataean city shaped by both local tradition and international connection, later drawn into the Roman province of Arabia. Figures such as Hinat give this a human face and bring forward the status of women in ancient Arabia.

Visitors then discover the oasis kingdoms of Dadan, Lihyan and Tayma, where agriculture, trade, sanctuaries, monumental sculpture and writing came together in a literate, devotional and politically organised society connected to long-distance exchange. The generous space of the first hall allows the colossal Dadanite statuary, the sanctuary of Umm Daraj and the written landscape of Jabal Ikma to be seen with full impact.

This second hall ends with the exploration of an extraordinary landscape anchored in deep-time. Long before cities and kingdoms, people moved through, hunted, built, buried and adapted to changing climates. This zone reveals Khaybar and the wider volcanic landscape, showing how geology, water and climate shaped human settlement across north-west Arabia over hundreds of thousands of years.

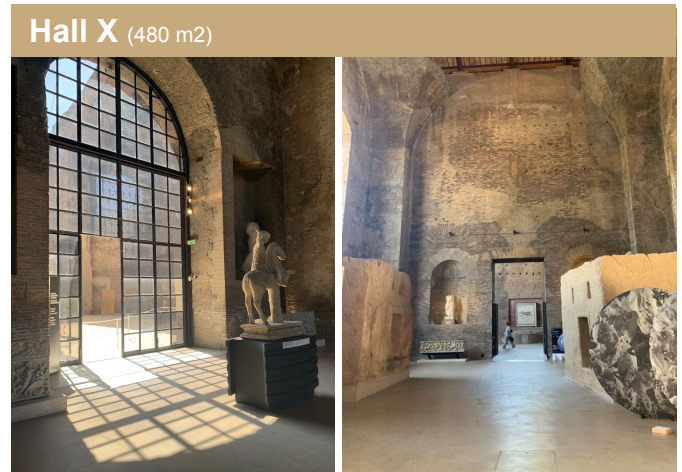
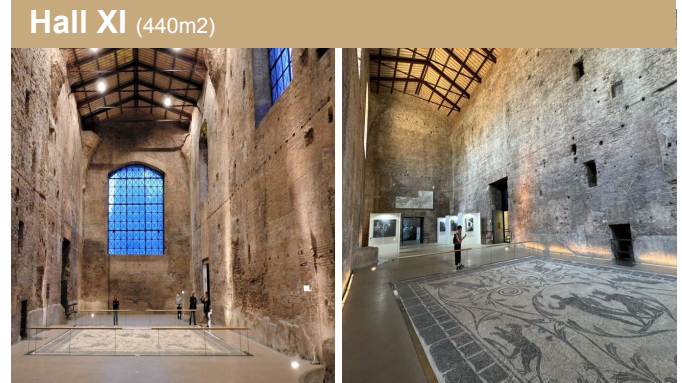
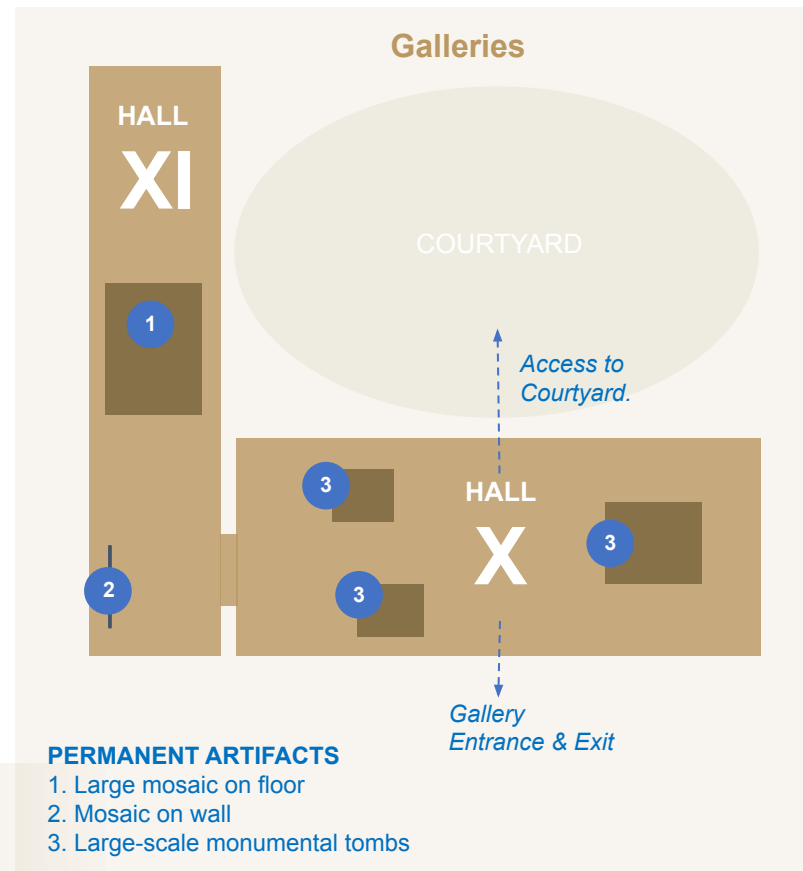
Recent research across AlUla and its territory has revealed this to be one of the richest prehistoric landscapes anywhere in the world: monumental ritual structures, desert kites, funerary avenues and rock art, and evidence of human presence reaching back across hundreds of thousands of years. This is where the exhibition's ever-changing character is most tangible — the deep past of AlUla is being actively rediscovered.





Exhibition Galleries & Visitor Experience

Exhibition Galleries: Terme di Diocleziano



Visitor Experience

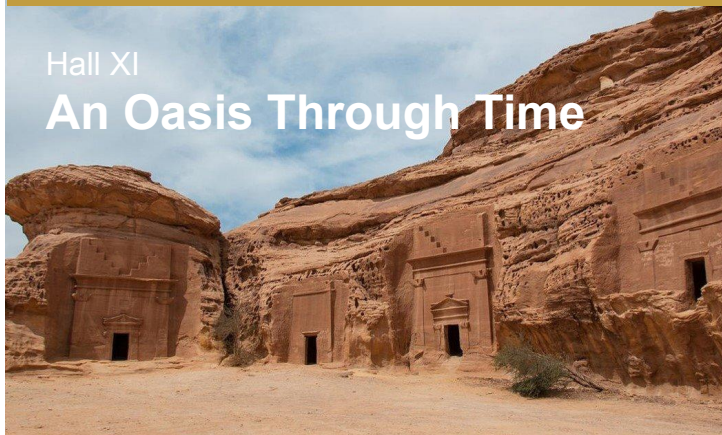
Two halls, two atmospheres

The exhibition will occupy two halls in the Terme di Diocleziano, inviting visitors to experience the shift from “Arabia on its own terms” to “Arabia and Rome, face to face.”

Hall X opens by immersing the visitor into a **living oasis**, while Hall XI surrounds visitors with the **legendary tombs of Hegra** and the **monumental landscapes of Dadan and Khaybar**.

Designing with the building

The Terme di Diocleziano is not a neutral box — it is a character in the story. The exhibition design should celebrate the Roman brick architecture, using balanced contemporary interventions to frame the ancient fabric and invite a dialogue between the two.

Hall X An Oasis in Rome 	• Oasis threshold, a multisensory orientation (water, scent, light) into AIUla's lush and green oasis environment. • Connections between Rome and AIUla.
Hall XI An Oasis Through Time 	• The monumental landscapes of Hegra, Dadan and Khaybar • Focus on Hinat, the human face of Hegra, bringing both an individual focus and the wider status of women into the conversation.

Design Approach

Media, graphic & lighting strategy

- **Multimedia immersion**
A key scenographic differentiator from the KSA *Roads of Arabia* exhibition presented in the same venue in 2019, immersive large-scale projections and aerial CGIs will immerse visitors into AlUla's landscapes.
- **A graphic design approach that carries the narrative threads**
An Arabic script-inspired visual identity will connect with the epigraphic heart of AlUla's collection of inscriptions and the nearby Epigraphy Museum.
- **Lighting as a dramatic tool**
The Terme is naturally atmospheric; low ambient light with focused pools lets the architecture and the objects do the work.

Flow, pacing & access

- **A single, legible route** with deliberate changes of pace: immersive at the oasis, expansive at the kingdoms, focused at Hegra, reflective at the partnership, open and free in the courtyard.
- **Layered, multilingual interpretation**
Headline messages are legible at a glance, with depth available for those who want it.
- **Pause and gather**
Seating and moments of rest through the route, with the courtyard doubling as decompression and an events space for talks and screenings.

The Baths of Diocletian are not merely a venue but a frame of meaning, allowing AlUla and Rome to meet.



Exhibition Zones

HALL X— AN OASIS IN ROME

Z0 — An Oasis in Dialogue with Rome

Z1 — Inhabiting the Oasis

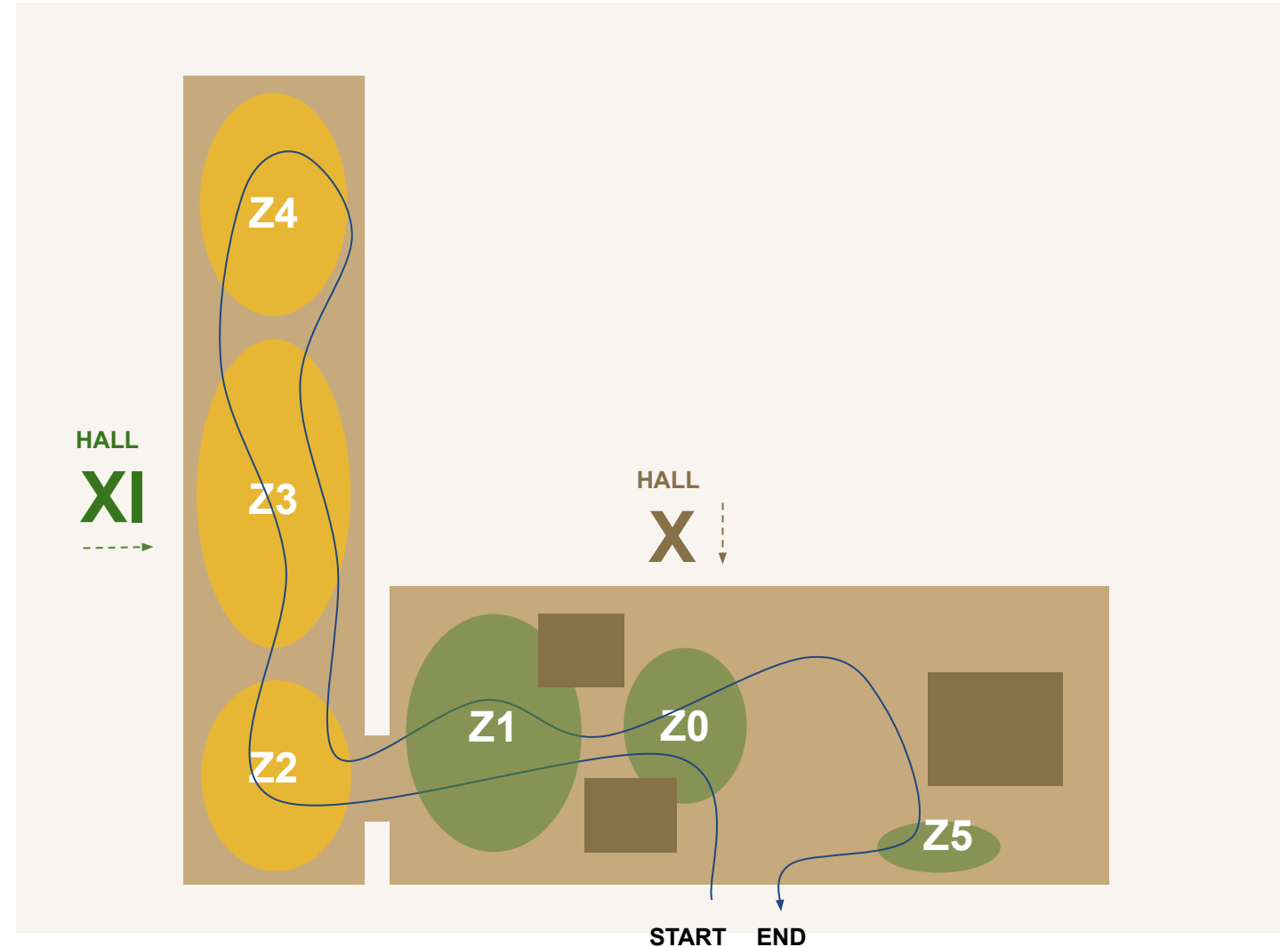
Z5 — Shared Endeavors

HALL XI— AN OASIS THROUGH TIME

Z2 — Hegra, at the Edge of Rome

Z3 — Oasis Kingdoms: Power, Routes and Writing

Z4 — Climate Change, Deep time and the rise of the oasis





Exhibition Zones

Zone 0 — An Oasis in Dialogue with Rome

The exhibition opens with two questions: **Why AlUla? Why Rome?** Visitors are introduced to AlUla not as an empty desert, but as a living oasis shaped by water, settlement, ingenuity and renewal. The oasis becomes the foundation of the story: a symbol of Saudi heritage, sustainability, cultural memory and national identity.

Rome is introduced as the second anchor. Through the venue and selected objects, the visitor understands that AlUla and Rome were connected in antiquity, and that this historic connection now continues through cultural partnership.

ARTIFACTS

- Incense burner with Latin inscriptions, as first signal of the connection with Rome.
- The Terme di Diocleziano as an active Roman narrative device.

MEDIA

- Oasis Projection (Yann Arthur-Bertrand)
- AlUla Geology Model
- Tabletop Projection
- Immersive large-scale projection: water, palms, scent, light and sound.

IMAGES

- Map: Orientation to AlUla, Tayma and Khaybar within north-west Arabia.



Zone 1 — Inhabiting the oasis

AlUla's story begins with water.

The oasis is shown as a living system of palm groves, irrigation, mudbrick architecture, domestic life, agriculture and hospitality. It is both an ancient lifeline and a modern Saudi symbol of endurance, environmental knowledge and cultural continuity. This zone gives visitors their first emotional connection to AlUla: a place inhabited, cultivated and remembered.

ARTIFACTS

- Objects related to water systems: wells, irrigation, ropes, wheels and agricultural tools.
- Domestic and hospitality objects: coffee, incense, ceramics, lamps and coins.
- Old Town and Oasis architectural pieces.

MEDIA

- Media showing Old Town / oasis architecture, settlement and landscape.
- Old Town and the Oasis CGI reconstruction.

GRAPHICS

- Photography and archival materials showing historic travel, railway and telegraph materials.



Zone 2 — Hegra, at the Edge of Rome

In this zone, AlUla meets Rome.

Hegra is presented as a Nabataean city of trade, ritual, water management, elite display and funerary monumentality. After 106 CE, it became part of the Roman province of Arabia, where local Arabian traditions and imperial systems met.

In the Terme di Diocleziano, this connection becomes physical: Hegra's tombs are placed in dialogue with Rome's own first-century funerary monuments. Arabia and Rome stand face to face.

ARTIFACTS

- Nabataean and Roman material: coins, ceramics, lamps, urns and inscriptions.
- Latin inscriptions and evidence of Roman presence.
- Hinat reconstruction as the human face of Hegra and a key moment for women's status.
- Textiles, featuring conservation and reconstruction.

MEDIA

- Hegra CGI reconstruction
- Rock-cut architecture and stone-carving animation
- Funerary ritual animation
- Hinat focus film
- Hegra from the Sky (Yann Arthur-Bertrand).

IMAGES

- Tomb façades, carving, inscriptions and funerary culture.



Zone 3 — Oasis Kingdoms: Power, Routes and Writing

Before Hegra and before Rome, north-west Arabia was already home to powerful, literate and connected oasis kingdoms. Dadan, Lihyan and Tayma reveal societies of authority, devotion, writing, trade and monumental display.

Here the oasis becomes power. Agriculture supports settlement; trade creates wealth; inscriptions preserve names, prayers, offerings and identities.

Keywords:

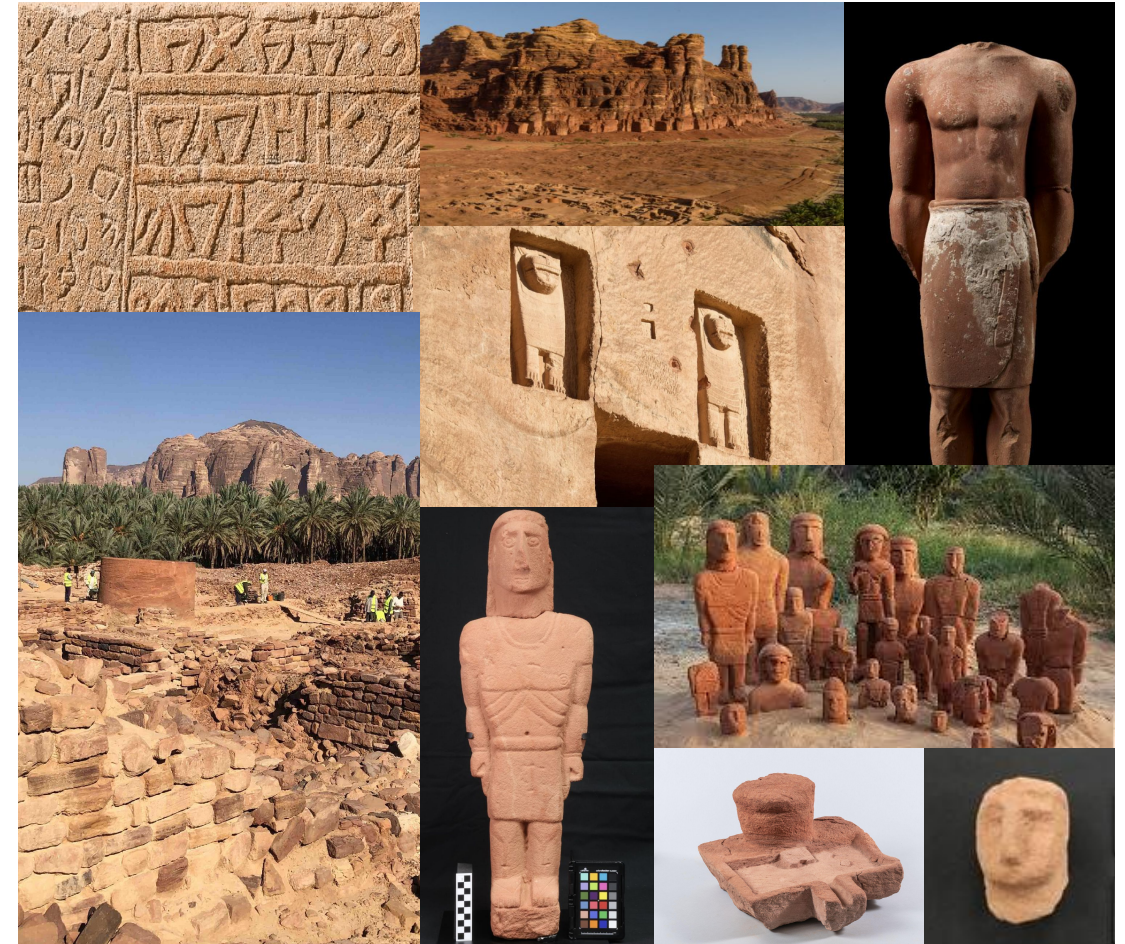
Jabal Ikma, Tayma, Bir Haddaj

ARTIFACTS

- Monumental Dadanite and Lihyanite sculpture.
- Incense burners, ritual objects and devotional evidence
- Dhu Ghabat, Umm Daraj, offerings and sanctuary material.

MEDIA

- Dadan CGI reconstruction
- Immersive inscriptions installation
- Dadan / Umm Daraj media.



Zone 4 — Climate Change, Deep time and the rise of the oasis

AlUla and its wider region preserve an extraordinary deep-time landscape. Long before cities and kingdoms, people moved through, hunted, built, buried and adapted to changing climates. This zone reveals the depth beneath the oasis story.

Khaybar and the wider volcanic landscape show how geology, water and climate shaped human settlement across north-west Arabia over hundreds of thousands of years.

ARTIFACTS

- Hand axes, stone tools, arrowheads and faunal remains.

MEDIA

- Aerial / immersive media to show scale and landscape patterns.

IMAGES

- Mustatils, desert kites, cairns, funerary avenues and rock art
- Al-Natah and Bronze Age imagery showing settlement as early organised life.



Zone 5 — Shared Endeavors

The relationship between AlUla and Italy is not only ancient; it is active today. This zone presents the modern partnership between Saudi and Italian specialists working in archaeology, conservation, research, training and heritage science.

This is the diplomatic and institutional payoff. AlUla is positioned not only as a place of extraordinary heritage, but as a centre of contemporary expertise and international collaboration.

MEDIA

- Media productions featuring Saudi and Italian teams working side by side.
 - Conservation of stone, inscriptions, textiles and archaeological material.
 - 3D documentation, diagnostics, fieldwork and scientific analysis.
 - Before / after conservation imagery.
 - Training, knowledge exchange and capacity building.
 - RCU / KI, MNR and Italian partners as part of a wider heritage ecosystem.

