

THE PROTECTION OF WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN HAIL, SAUDI ARABIA, UNDER INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS AND NATIONAL LAWS

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Abstract

Since the adoption of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972, UNESCO has worked to identify World Heritage Sites that possess outstanding value to humanity and to include them on the World Heritage List. This aims to enhance the protection of these sites at both international and national levels. Although these sites are owned by the countries within whose borders they are located, the responsibility for protecting them lies with the international community as a whole, because they represent a shared global heritage.

International conventions require all member states to participate in the preservation and protection of these sites during both peacetime and wartime. They also oblige countries in which these sites are located to implement specific protection measures within their national legal systems.

One example of such sites is the Rock Art of the Hail Region, which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2015. As a result of this designation, these sites have received strengthened protection on both international and national levels.

This study aims to shed light on these sites located in the Hail region, explore their importance to global cultural heritage, outline the protection they receive under international agreements and national legislation, and examine ways to enhance this protection through local policies and community involvement.

Keywords: World Heritage List, UNESCO, Rock Art, Hail, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Legal Protection.

1. Introduction

The Hail region in northern Saudi Arabia has been distinguished throughout the ages by its unique geography and terrain. These features have granted it particular significance throughout history, making it a center of human settlement in ancient times, thousands of years before the Common Era. This human presence has continued uninterrupted through successive historical periods up to the modern era.

Archaeological surveys and the discovery of material evidence indicate that the Hail region was inhabited during prehistoric times, the periods preceding the emergence of writing.

During this era, humans expressed their activities and rituals through petroglyphs and engravings on rock faces. Thousands of rock carvings have been discovered that depict human life in those times, particularly in the Jubbah area near Jabal Umm Sinman, which is considered the largest site of ancient rock art in Saudi Arabia, as well as the sites of the Rat and al-Manjur valleys in the Shuwaymis area. These locations contain thousands of pieces of rock art and engravings dating back tens of thousands of years before the Common Era. They depict animals, human figures, hunting scenes, and symbols engraved on sandstone formations. These engravings offer essential insights into the cultural, social, and spiritual lives of the early human communities in the Arabian Peninsula (Baumer, 2020).

The rock art in Hail represents one of the oldest and most enduring forms of human expression in the region. According to Bednarik and Khan (2005), scientific and methodological analyses including both direct and indirect dating techniques have confirmed that some of these artworks date back to the Late Pleistocene and the early Holocene. These findings affirm that Hail was not merely a center of human habitation but also a significant symbolic and ritualistic space.

The images engraved on the sandstone surfaces in Jubbah and Shuwaymis reflect transformations in subsistence strategies, beginning with the hunting of large wild animals such as aurochs and ibex, and progressing toward pastoral economies. Jennings et al. (2013) argue that the rock scenes in Jubbah are closely linked to the ancient environment of the Jubbah Palaeolake, where the abundance of water resources supported human settlement and cultural development. Therefore, these artworks serve as a record of environmental adaptation and social continuity across millennia.

According to the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted by UNESCO in 1972, the organization identifies exceptional sites around the globe that constitute outstanding cultural or natural heritage and lists them on the World Heritage List, recognizing them as a shared heritage of humanity. These sites must then be protected and preserved at both the international and national levels.

In 2015, the rock art of the Hail region was inscribed on the World Heritage List, becoming one of eight sites in Saudi Arabia currently registered as World Heritage Sites.

This inscription grants these sites, under international law and relevant conventions, international protection aimed at safeguarding archaeological sites from any damage or destruction, and at creating suitable conditions for their preservation both in times of peace and in times of war and armed conflict. This protection is clearly reflected in various international conventions adopted by UNESCO in this regard, such as the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the Rome Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property, the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, among others. These conventions constitute the principles of international humanitarian law concerning cultural property and World Heritage Sites.

At the national level, Saudi Arabia, by virtue of its accession to these international agreements and its commitment to preserving its national heritage, cultural assets, and heritage sites, has imposed national protection on these sites through a set of laws and regulations issued by the Kingdom in this regard.

In this study, we aim to shed light on the international and national protection afforded to World Heritage Sites in the Hail region under international law and Saudi national regulations, and to explore how the inscription of the rock art sites in Hail on the World Heritage List contributes to the optimal use and preservation of these sites.

2. Objectives of the Study:

- Identify the cultural and artistic value of the rock art sites in Hail.
- Evaluate their significance within the context of global cultural heritage.
- Analyze the national and international legal frameworks for the protection of these sites.
- Interpret the reasons behind the inscription of Hail's sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List.
- Propose policies for the protection and enhancement of tangible heritage, with a focus on legal protection and community engagement.

3. Problem Statement:

- A lack of studies addressing the legal dimension of rock art.
- The need to highlight its cultural value and methods of protection.

4. Significance of the Study:

- Scientifically: Contributing to the body of literature on Saudi cultural heritage, particularly in the Hail region.
- Practically: Supporting protection policies and community awareness initiatives.

5. Methodology of the Study:

5.1 Type of Study:

A descriptive analytical and legal study aimed at describing the rock art sites in the Hail region, analyzing their cultural and historical significance, interpreting the reasons for their inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and evaluating the national and international legal frameworks for their protection. The study also seeks to interpret the factors that led to their inclusion in the World Heritage List.

5.2 Sources and Data:

Primary Sources:

- The archaeological sites themselves: Jubbah, Shuwaymis, and Hail
- Saudi national laws and regulations related to cultural heritage
- International conventions concerned with heritage protection, including:
 - The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972 (UNESCO, 1972).
 - The UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970.
 - The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1954.

Secondary Sources:

- Published scientific studies on rock art in Hail.
- Official UNESCO reports on World Heritage Sites in the Kingdom.

5.3 Data Collection Methods:

- Desk Research: Analyzing previous studies on rock engravings and national and international laws.
- Legal Content Analysis: Reviewing the texts of international conventions and Saudi laws to identify obligations and the protection of these sites.
- Field Surveys: Documenting the current condition of the sites and evaluating the protective measures in place.

5.4 Analytical Tools:

- Descriptive analysis of rock engravings and classification of artistic symbols.
- Legal analysis to compare national legislation with international standards for heritage protection.
- Comparative analysis with similar global heritage sites to identify best practices in legal protection.

6. Previous Studies:

There is a collection of archaeological and descriptive studies on rock art, such as:

- Bednarik (2017), which provides a comprehensive review of Saudi rock art, identifying the sites and their significance.
- Baumer (2020), which offers a general introduction along with recent findings regarding Jubbah and Shuwaymis.

These and other studies have focused on the artistic analysis and archaeological description of the engravings and rock paintings, without concentrating on the legal aspect, and without linking the artistic and cultural analysis of the engravings on one hand, with the national and international legal protection on the other.

The current study fills this gap by focusing on the global cultural value of the rock art, examining the legal framework for protection at both the national and international levels, providing practical recommendations to enhance the protection of these sites, and reviewing the role of local communities in their preservation.

Theoretical Framework of the Study:

1. World Cultural Heritage and Its Shared Importance to Humanity:

1.1 The Concept of "World Cultural Heritage":

The term "world cultural heritage" refers to historical, artistic, architectural, and natural sites that constitute a civilizational legacy shared by all of humanity. These sites possess exceptional significance that extends beyond national boundaries (UNESCO 1972). Cultural heritage includes tangible elements such as buildings and monuments, as well as intangible elements such as customs, traditions, and artistic and artisanal knowledge. This heritage is recognized for its value as an essential part of the collective human identity and serves as a foundation for understanding the historical development of societies over time (Labadi 2017). Within this framework, the concept of "Outstanding Universal Value" (OUV) is particularly significant. This concept, adopted by UNESCO in the evaluation of sites nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List, refers to the exceptional cultural or natural significance of a site from the perspective of humanity as a whole. The recognition of such value renders the protection of these sites a shared responsibility that surpasses the jurisdiction of the host state (UNESCO 1972; Labadi 2017).

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage provides a specific definition of "world cultural heritage" in Article 1. It defines cultural heritage as follows:

- "1. Monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings, and combinations of features which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science.
2. Groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity, or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science.
3. Sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological, or anthropological point of view" (UNESCO 1972).

1.2 The Importance of Cultural Heritage to Humanity:

World cultural heritage constitutes a fundamental part of human identity. It serves as a bridge connecting the past with the present and stands as a testament to the development of human civilizations. It holds great significance in the lives of peoples, as it supports the preservation and advancement of knowledge, contributes to the strengthening of cultural and social identity within communities, and influences values, beliefs, and the sense of belonging (Stephenson 2023). There is no doubt that the disappearance or loss of any part of this world cultural

heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all peoples around the globe (UNESCO 1972).

The benefits of preserving cultural heritage extend to educational, social, and economic domains. For instance, heritage sites contribute to the promotion of cultural tourism, the creation of job opportunities, and the support of local economies. They also serve as platforms for the exchange of knowledge and the promotion of dialogue between different cultures. In addition, cultural heritage plays a role in preserving historical narratives, allowing societies to learn from the past, avoid repeating previous mistakes, and appreciate the progress achieved by nations (Stephenson 2023).

Cultural heritage is also regarded as a key element in sustainable development, as it can help alleviate poverty by supporting the development of local communities and attracting cultural investment (Jagielska-Burduk, Pszczyński, and Stec 2021).

2. Efforts of UNESCO in Protecting World Heritage through International Agreements:

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has played a pivotal role in the protection of cultural heritage through a series of international conventions and treaties that constitute the fundamental legal frameworks for safeguarding the shared heritage of humanity. Under UNESCO's umbrella, the international community has adopted several key conventions in this domain, the most prominent of which are outlined below.

2.1 The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954):

This convention is considered the first international treaty dedicated entirely to the protection of cultural heritage during times of armed conflict. It was developed in response to the widespread destruction of heritage during the Second World War. The convention outlines the obligations of state parties to protect cultural property during wartime and prohibits its use for military purposes or its intentional destruction. It also establishes mechanisms for international cooperation to ensure the safeguarding of such heritage (O'Keefe 2006).

In the preamble to the convention, it is affirmed that damage to cultural property constitutes harm to the cultural heritage of all humanity, regardless of the nation to which it belongs. The convention details the measures that states must undertake during peacetime to ensure the protection of cultural property, as well as the procedures required during occupation and armed conflict. Furthermore, it obligates all state parties to enact national legislation to ensure the protection of this heritage and to promote respect for the value of cultural property within society (UNESCO 1954).

2.2 The UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970):

The twentieth century witnessed a marked increase in the theft and smuggling of antiquities from developing countries, many of which struggled to recover their cultural assets after they entered the global art market. In response, UNESCO developed a comprehensive international convention aimed at preventing the loss of cultural heritage and ensuring its return to its place of origin. This convention represents a major milestone in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property and is recognized as the first international instrument in this field (Jagielska-Burduk, Pszczyński, and Stec 2021).

The convention sets out a number of core objectives, most notably: preventing illicit trafficking of cultural property through the establishment of import and export controls; requiring state parties to implement legislative and administrative measures to monitor the circulation of cultural property; and encouraging international cooperation in the recovery and return of looted or illegally exported items. It also emphasizes the importance of raising public awareness about the value of cultural heritage and the need to protect it.

Among the specific obligations outlined for state parties are: the creation of national

inventories of important cultural property to be protected from unlawful export; regulation of import and export operations through official licenses; the imposition of criminal or administrative sanctions on individuals or institutions involved in smuggling cultural goods; and mutual assistance between state parties in preventing illicit trade or in recovering stolen cultural property. The convention also encourages museums and art institutions to refrain from acquiring any antiquities that lack legitimate documentation verifying their origin (UNESCO 1970; Forrest 2010).

The 1970 Convention serves as a foundational reference for subsequent agreements and protocols related to heritage protection, such as the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. This latter convention addresses certain gaps left unaddressed by the 1970 Convention and obligates all member states to establish national authorities within their territories to protect cultural heritage and to undertake educational measures aimed at fostering respect for cultural heritage within their societies (Jagielska-Burduk, Pszczyński, and Stec 2021).

2.3 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972):

The General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Convention on 16 November 1972, and it entered into force on 17 December 1975. The Convention was based on the principle that certain cultural and natural properties possess "outstanding universal value" and therefore deserve protection as the common heritage of humanity (UNESCO, 1972).

This Convention is considered the most significant achievement of UNESCO in this field, as it established a legal framework for the protection of sites of outstanding universal value and affirmed the principle that world heritage does not belong solely to the state but to humanity as a whole, with the responsibility for its protection resting upon the international community (Labadi, 2017). The Convention led to the creation of the "World Heritage List," which includes thousands of sites across different continents, while also providing mechanisms for funding and technical assistance to States Parties. It obliges member states to nominate their exceptional sites for inclusion on the World Heritage List and to develop conservation plans for these sites in accordance with defined scientific and administrative standards (Jagielska-Burduk, Pszczyński, and Stec, 2021). The Convention represented a major turning point in the concept of international heritage protection, resulting in the inscription of more than 1,200 cultural and natural sites on the World Heritage List by 2025, distributed across 168 countries worldwide. It has also strengthened cooperation between developing and developed states in the exchange of expertise and the provision of technical assistance (UNESCO, 2023).

2.4 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001):

This Convention focuses on the protection of underwater and submerged archaeological sites such as ancient ships and historic ports. Its primary aim is to prevent looting and uncontrolled destruction of such sites and to ensure that their study and exploration are conducted in a scientific manner. UNESCO adopted this Convention in 2001 as a complement to its earlier conventions of 1954, 1970, and 1972 (Jagielska-Burduk, Pszczyński, and Stec, 2021). According to the Convention, underwater cultural heritage falls under international protection and may not be exploited commercially in any form, as explicitly stated in the text (UNESCO, 2001).

2.5 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003):

UNESCO adopted this Convention to promote the protection of intangible heritage such as customs, music, dance, languages, and traditional social practices. Its aim is to enable local communities to safeguard and express their cultural heritage (Labadi, 2017). This protective approach reflects the recognition of the need to safeguard oral traditions, cultural, social, and religious rituals, as well as all forms of knowledge and customs that constitute intangible cultural heritage (Jagielska-Burduk, Pszczyński, and Stec, 2021).

These conventions demonstrate that UNESCO's efforts have not been limited to the protection of monuments and physical sites but have also extended to intangible heritage, underwater heritage, and cultural diversity. This reflects a comprehensive vision of heritage protection as a fundamental component of the identity of peoples and as a pillar of sustainable development.

3. Ratification of International Conventions for the Protection of World Heritage by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

On 8 September 1976, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO, n.d., Saudi Arabia: Conventions ratified). This ratification represents an important step in the Kingdom's commitment to protecting both national and international cultural heritage and reflects its dedication to cooperating with the international community in combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property.

By acceding to this Convention, the Kingdom undertakes several key measures, most notably:

- Legislation and regulation: enacting domestic laws to prohibit the illicit export of antiquities and establishing mechanisms for monitoring and control (UNESCO, 1970).
- Preparation of national inventories: creating and documenting lists of protected archaeological properties.
- International cooperation: participating in the exchange of information and assisting in restitution processes.
- Awareness and education: raising public awareness about the dangers of illicit trafficking in antiquities.

On 7 August 1978, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia deposited its instruments of acceptance for the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and thereby became an active party to the international system for heritage protection (UNESCO, n.d.-a). This ratification constituted a strategic step in integrating the Kingdom into global efforts to safeguard heritage, particularly given its wealth of archaeological and historical sites of outstanding universal value, such as Al-Hijr (Madain Salih), the Historic Diriyah, the Rock Art of the Hail Region, etc.

By acceding to this Convention, the Kingdom assumed several fundamental obligations, including:

- Identifying sites of outstanding universal value and nominating them for inscription on the World Heritage List (UNESCO, 1972).
- Developing management and conservation plans for these sites in accordance with international standards.
- Submitting periodic reports to the World Heritage Committee on the state of conservation of listed sites.
- Participating in capacity-building programs and the exchange of expertise with other States Parties.
- Providing or receiving technical and financial support for the protection of threatened sites.

With regard to the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001), Saudi Arabia ratified it on 13 November 2015 (UNESCO, n.d.). Under this Convention, the Kingdom is expected to fulfill several obligations, including:

- Adhering to the principle of in situ preservation and avoiding any commercial exploitation of underwater heritage.
- Promptly reporting any archaeological discoveries within its maritime jurisdiction or aboard vessels under its authority.
- Contributing to capacity-building and the development of local expertise in maritime archaeology in cooperation with international institutions.
- Enhancing international cooperation with other states to protect submerged heritage and

exchange knowledge and information (UNESCO, 2001).

Furthermore, the Kingdom ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), depositing its instrument of acceptance on 10 January 2008 (UNESCO, n.d.). By joining this Convention, the Kingdom undertakes the following commitments:

- Empowering local communities in identifying, safeguarding, and transmitting intangible heritage to future generations.
- Nominating elements of intangible cultural heritage for inclusion on UNESCO's international lists.
- Playing an active role in the intergovernmental committee responsible for the implementation of the Convention.
- Preparing periodic reports on the Kingdom's efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (Alshehaby, 2024).

4. Cultural Heritage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

4.1 UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Sites in Saudi Arabia:

The World Heritage Committee has established a set of cultural and natural criteria that must be met for properties nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List, such as:

- Representing a masterpiece of human creative genius.
- Bearing unique testimony to a living or vanished civilization.
- Containing superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and ecological significance (Cameron & Rössler, 2013).

The process of inscription on the World Heritage List begins when the State Party submits a Nomination Dossier to the World Heritage Committee. The dossier includes a detailed description of the site, the reasons for its “outstanding universal value,” and a plan for its conservation and sustainable management (Labadi, 2017). The nominated sites undergo scientific review by the advisory bodies to ensure compliance with international standards, after which the Committee issues its decision either to inscribe the site, reject the nomination, or request modifications to the file.

By 2025, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in inscribing eight sites on the World Heritage List, including, for example:

- Al-Hijr Archaeological Site (Madain Salih): the first Saudi site to be inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2008. It is located in AlUla Governorate in the northwest of the Kingdom and is considered one of the most prominent archaeological sites reflecting the Nabataean civilization. The site contains rock-cut tombs dating back to the first century BCE, which demonstrate remarkable architectural skills and serve as a living testimony to the development of construction techniques in that period (UNESCO, 2008).
- At-Turaif District in ad-Dir'iyah: inscribed in 2010 and located in the city of Diriyah northwest of Riyadh. It is the birthplace of the First Saudi State and is characterized by traditional Najdi mudbrick architecture, including Salwa Palace and the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Mosque. The site represents national identity and the political history of the Kingdom (UNESCO, 2010).
- Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah: inscribed in 2014, this site was the main gateway to Makkah. It is distinguished by old coral-stone buildings, traditional markets, and historic mosques. It represents a living example of cultural and commercial interaction between East and West over the centuries (UNESCO, 2014).
- ...along with additional sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

4.2 The Rock Art in the Hail Region:

The Rock Art in the Hail Region was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2015 as the fourth Saudi archaeological site to be added. This recognition reflects not only its artistic and aesthetic value but also its unique role as evidence of human creativity and

symbolic communication in prehistoric times (UNESCO, 2015).

4.2.1 Site Description:

The Hail Region, located in northern Saudi Arabia, contains some of the most prominent rock art sites dating back to prehistoric times. These rock engravings reflect the history of human presence in the Arabian Peninsula throughout ancient and middle periods. They include carvings and drawings depicting hunting, agriculture, and social and religious practices (Saudipedia, 2025).

The site consists of two main parts:

- Jabal Umm Sinman in Jubbah: located about 90 kilometers northwest of the city of Hail. The mountain contains rock engravings dating back more than 12,000 years, illustrating hunting scenes and animals such as camels and ibex.
- Jabal al-Manjor and Jabal Raat in Shuwaymis: located about 250 kilometers south of Hail. These mountains feature engravings depicting social and religious scenes, reflecting daily life and spiritual beliefs of ancient populations (Bednarik, 2017).

4.2.2 Historical and Cultural Significance of the Site:

The rock art sites in Hail form an integral part of the tangible cultural heritage of the Kingdom for several reasons:

- Historical and archaeological value: the sites contain hundreds of engravings and carvings that illustrate the life of ancient humans in the region, including hunting, agriculture, and interaction with the environment
- Artistic and expressive value: these engravings are among the earliest forms of artistic expression in the Arabian Peninsula, reflecting the evolution of artistic skills and cultural symbolism in ancient communities
- Testimony to cultural diversity: the engravings reflect social and religious diversity in ancient societies and provide evidence of interactions between successive civilizations in the region (Bradshaw Foundation, n.d.; Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, n.d.; World Heritage Site, n.d.; UNESCO, 2015; Saudipedia, 2025).

These rock carvings are a living testimony to human development in prehistoric times. They provide insight into daily life and spiritual beliefs of ancient peoples and represent an important reference for the study of ancient civilizations. Unlike archaeological sites that focus on architecture or tools, the Hail rock art provides direct evidence of symbolic thinking, myth-making, and cultural memory, making it a foundation for understanding Arab identity in a global context (Bednarik, 2017).

4.2.3 Reasons for Inscription on the World Heritage List:

The Rock Art in the Hail Region was inscribed on the World Heritage List based on its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), specifically under criteria (i) and (iii):

- Criterion (i): a masterpiece of human creative genius. The Hail rock art demonstrates exceptional skill in depicting animals and humans with stylistic accuracy and symbolic depth, making it one of the most significant early artistic achievements in the Arabian Peninsula (UNESCO, 2015).
- Criterion (iii): a unique testimony to a cultural tradition. The engravings preserve invaluable evidence of ancient cultural traditions, including hunting practices, animal domestication, and spiritual life. They reflect the transition from hunter-gatherer communities to more stable and complex societies (Baumer, 2020).

The inscription of the Hail rock art sites on the World Heritage List affirms the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's position as a key guardian of global heritage. These sites not only reinforce national identity but also contribute to international academic research on prehistoric art, human migration, and cultural evolution. As Baumer (2020) notes, the Hail sites offer comparative value with other world regions such as Africa and Europe, underscoring the Arabian Peninsula's pivotal role in the shared narrative of humanity.

5. Legal and Regulatory Protection of Rock Art and World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia:

Since the inscription of these sites on the World Heritage List, their preservation has become linked to several legal mechanisms at both the international and national levels:

5.1 International Framework:

As noted earlier, the 1954 Hague Convention obliges States Parties to adopt precautionary measures in peacetime (such as inventories, evacuation plans, and protective instructions) and respect measures during conflict (including refraining from targeting or using sites for military purposes). These obligations are directly relevant to open-air sites such as the rock art in the Hail Region, which require emergency plans, distinctive markings, and monitoring systems.

The 1970 Convention further requires States Parties to establish national inventories, export licensing mechanisms, recovery cooperation measures, and awareness initiatives regarding the art market. These provisions support the fight against the illicit trafficking of inscriptions, panels, and associated artifacts from rock art sites.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017) emphasized that the destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage threaten peace and security. It called upon States to enhance criminalization, judicial and customs cooperation, and emergency funding (United Nations Security Council, 2017). This resolution provides additional support for the enforcement of the international conventions mentioned above.

Saudi Arabia's UNESCO profile lists its dates of accession to these conventions (UNESCO, n.d.), which establish a clear international mandate for protecting archaeological sites in the Kingdom, including the rock art sites in the Hail Region.

5.2 National Framework:

Saudi Arabia has built a legal protection system grounded in binding international conventions and supportive UN resolutions, incorporating mechanisms for safeguarding tangible cultural heritage into its national laws. For example, Article 29 of the Basic Law of Governance stipulates that the State shall "preserve the Islamic and Arab heritage and contribute to Arab, Islamic, and human civilization" (Saudi Arabia, 1992). In addition, the Kingdom has enacted specific legislation to protect heritage and prevent tampering with archaeological sites, as follows:

5.2.1 Development of Saudi Legislation for the Protection of Heritage and Archaeological Sites:

-First Antiquities Law (1972):

The legal framework for heritage protection in Saudi Arabia began with Royal Decree No. M/26 of 1972, which approved the Antiquities Law as the first Saudi legislation dedicated to the protection, registration, management, and supervision of archaeological sites. This law represented a foundational step in establishing a legal structure for safeguarding cultural heritage within the Kingdom (Alshehaby, 2024). It was one of the early mechanisms for protecting the rock art sites in Hail and Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage more broadly (UNESCO, 2015).

-Expanded Law of Antiquities, Museums, and Urban Heritage (2014):

In June 2014, a comprehensive law was enacted—Law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage—replacing the earlier Antiquities Law. It addressed the regulatory dimension of heritage and archaeological sites, incorporated the international dimension, and defined visible, buried, and submerged antiquities requiring protection. It also established degrees of protection, set forth administrative systems, and introduced strict penalties for theft, vandalism, or deterioration of heritage (Saudi Arabia, 2014).

The law provided an inclusive definition of antiquities and archaeological sites (Article 1), thereby extending protection to cultural landscapes surrounding sites. It required the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities to establish an official register of antiquities,

including both immovable and movable heritage (Article 8), coordinate with government agencies to protect sites during development projects and designate unbuilt buffer zones (Article 9), and create the Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage Fund to finance conservation, restoration, museum operations, and private sector participation (Article 20).

The law also introduced community collaboration incentives, including rewards for reporting discoveries, violations, or assisting in preservation efforts (Article 89). It further required the Commission to prepare development plans for archaeological sites, covering protection strategies, requirements, urban boundaries, and surrounding infrastructure. These features highlight Saudi Arabia's legislative and institutional alignment with the UNESCO framework (Wosiński, 2022).

5.2.2 Protection Procedures and Field Measures for the Rock Art Sites in Hail:

Saudi Arabia has implemented a range of field measures to protect the rock art sites in Hail, including:

A) Continuous monitoring and surveillance:

advanced technologies such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), remote sensing, and periodic photographic documentation are used to detect erosion and vandalism. Local guards also patrol sites daily to prevent damage (Bednarik, 2017). The Ministry of Culture administers field programs for documenting inscriptions, establishing protected zones, and conducting regular restoration and maintenance in cooperation with international experts (Saudi Gazette, 2022).

B) Regulation of visitor access:

to reduce the impact of heavy visitation, authorities impose daily visitor limits and establish designated pathways and viewing platforms to prevent direct contact with the inscriptions (UNESCO, 2015).

C) Expansion of the buffer zone:

The buffer zone of Jabal Umm Sinman was extended from 100 to 150 meters. In addition, high surrounding sand dunes serve as an effective natural buffer.

D) Preventive conservation:

Measures include removing harmful vegetation, controlling water runoff, and applying non-invasive techniques to mitigate natural deterioration of inscriptions (Bednarik, 2017).

E) Emergency response plans:

Strategies were developed to manage potential risks such as floods, sandstorms, and unregulated tourism pressure, ensuring rapid interventions to protect fragile rock panels (Wosiński, 2022).

F) Community participation:

Engaging the local community is considered vital. Awareness programs highlight the cultural value of rock art, fostering a sense of responsibility among residents toward site protection (Bakr, 2024).

6. Challenges and Future Prospects:

Despite these efforts, the rock art sites in the Hail Region face several challenges, including climate change, natural erosion, increasing tourism, and human interventions such as modern graffiti. Balancing accessibility with preservation remains difficult. Nevertheless, the introduction of digital preservation techniques such as 3D scanning, alongside the strengthening of legal frameworks, is expected to ensure the sustainability of these sites for future generations (Bakr, 2024).

7. Results:

- The global significance of the rock art of Hail: the study demonstrates that the rock art sites of Hail represent exceptional value for world cultural heritage, as they reflect the development

of human and artistic activity since prehistoric times, which qualified them for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

- Confirmation of international protection: Saudi Arabia's accession to the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the 1954 Hague Convention, and the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property reflects its international legal commitment to protecting these sites from threats in both peacetime and conflict.
- The national legal framework: the findings show that Saudi national legislation, such as the Law of Antiquities, Museums, and Urban Heritage (2014), supports both field and legal protection of these sites and imposes strict penalties on violations or illicit trafficking in antiquities.
- Field measures: although international reports (UNESCO, 2017) indicate that monitoring and follow-up systems for the Hail rock art sites have been developed, the technical details, such as the use of CCTV cameras and integration with a control center, remain neither officially nor publicly documented. This points to the need for greater transparency and dissemination of information.
- Current challenges: the main challenges facing the rock art sites of Hail include natural factors (erosion and sandstorms), human pressures (visitors and potential vandalism), and the limited number of specialized scientific field studies documenting and assessing the effectiveness of protection measures.
- The need for community involvement: strengthening the protection of rock art sites requires the active involvement of local communities in safeguarding and awareness initiatives, as they represent the first line of defense for cultural heritage. This aligns with UNESCO's recommendations.
- The research gap: academic studies on Saudi Arabia's rock art, particularly in Hail, remain limited compared with the attention given to other global sites. This calls for greater encouragement of scientific research in documentation, conservation, and heritage management.

8. Recommendations:

Despite the legislative and institutional alignment of Saudi Arabia's case with the framework of UNESCO conventions, the study recommends improving the enforcement of penalties for small-scale vandalism, enhancing digital monitoring, involving local communities in participatory monitoring, and expanding specialized training programs for the conservation of these sites.

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