Crossing Ancient Sacred Landscapes
Contacts and Continuities in the Ancient Desert Cults and Beliefs of Northern Arabia and the Arid Southern Levant

Seminar of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
University of Oxford

5th - 6th December 2023
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
University of Oxford

Pusey Lane Oxford, OX1 2LE
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This will be a hybrid seminar, with in-person attendance and stream on Zoom. In-person and online attendees should register with Ms Lev Cosijns at lev.cosijns@arch.ox.ac.uk
I rose and climbed a mountain dry, the
greenery there had still not shown:
So putting shoes to both my feet, I sought a
spot where pasture had grown.
When I came to high Ghadir, that mountain
thick with shrubbery lay;
So we broke camp, got under way, and
stopped at Asbah’s tomb to pray.
Bedouin poem

Crossing different landscapes and periods has been a major feature of the desert cults
and beliefs of the Middle East, from prehistory to modern times. This seminar aims to
study the sacred landscapes of northern Arabia and the southern arid margins of the
Levant in ancient times throughout the longue durée, adopting an interdisciplinary
approach at the intersection between archaeology, history, epigraphy, rock art research,
and digital humanities. Scholars will present several case-studies with synchronic and
diachronic analyses of the cultic and mortuary traditions of the region from the
Neolithic to the Early Islamic period. The seminar is particularly interested in
phenomena of cultural continuity of cultic and ritual manifestations throughout large
geographical spaces. These cults and beliefs cut across different landscapes and periods.
Crossings were synchronic, with religious traditions, oral narratives, cultic material
culture, and funerary architecture, crossing diverse geographical landscapes and
socio-cultural entities of different complexity. Crossings were also diachronic, with
certain features of the material culture and architecture crossing through different
temporal periods.

This seminar is particularly timely, as the archaeology of Arabia and the southern
Levant, two fields that have developed for a long time in parallel without contact, are
increasingly communicating thematically and personally. This Oxford seminar,
therefore, aims to provide an opportunity to develop further the dialogue between these
fields.

Cover image: Aerial view of a mustatil east of Al-Ula. From https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0281904
Tuesday 5th December 2023

09:00-09:20 Welcome Address: The Archaeology and Epigraphy of Northwest Arabia and the Arid Southern Levant: From Old Paradigms to Digital Humanities
Juan Manuel Tebes & Michael C.A. Macdonald

Panel 1: The Archaeology of Cult and Death I
Session chair: Nicolai Sinai

09:25-09:45 Not at rest in the Neolithic: Active Roles for the Dead
Bill Finlayson (University of Oxford)

09:50-10:10 Continuities and Convergences in Negev Cult Sites over the Long Term
Steven Rosen (Ben Gurion University of the Negev)

10:15-10:35 Discussion | 10:35-10:55 Coffee Break

10:55-11:15 The Religious Topography of Dadan in the 1st Millennium BCE: Sanctuaries, Deities, Communities
Jérôme Rohmer (French National Centre for Scientific Research) & Josselin Pinot (University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne)

Melissa Kennedy (University of Sydney)

11:45-12:05 Cultic “Eruption” in the Desert, 8th-6th Millennia BCE
Uzi Avner (Dead Sea & Arava Science Center)

12:10-12:30 Discussion | 12:30-14:00 Lunch

Panel 2: The Rock Art Iconography of Cults and Beliefs
Session Chair: Michael Fradley

14:00-14:20 On the Crossroads between Arabia and the Levant: Evidence for Ancient Beliefs and the Movement of Individuals from Monumental Rock Art
Maria Guagnin (Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology)

14:25-14:45 Technological Signatures in Rock Art: Insights from Timna, Israel
Leni Dubinsky (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

14:50-15:10 Iconography and Chronology of Rock Art at selected Sites in Northern Arabia
Meinrat O. Andreae (Max Planck Institute for Chemistry)

15:15-15:35 Discussion
Wednesday 6th December 2023

Panel 3: The Epigraphic Evidence for Cults and Beliefs
Session chair: Michael Macdonald

09:00-09:20 Ritual Continuities: The Safaitic Inscriptions and Memories of Arabian Paganism in Islamic-period Sources
Ahmad Al-Jallad (Ohio State University)

09:25-09:45 The Evolution of the Theophoric Onomasticon in pre-Islamic Northwest Arabia according to the Epigraphic Evidence
Jérôme Norris (University of Lorraine)

09:50-10:10 From the Valley to the Mountains: A Survey of the Dadanitic Epigraphic Material from Different Types of Cultic Spaces associated with Ancient Dadan
Fokkien Kootstra (Ghent University)

10:15-10:35 Discussion | 10:35-10:55 Coffee Break

Panel 4: Continuities from the Late Pre-Islamic Cults to Christianity and Early Islam
Session chair: Maria Guagnin

10:55-11:15 Sacred Locales in the Qur’an
Nicolai Sinai (University of Oxford)

11:20-11:40 Ethico-religious Vocabulary on the Eve of Islam in light of Inscriptions from near Tabuk (HRahDA 4 and HRahDA 5b) and Arabic Poetry
Ilkka Lindstedt (University of Helsinki)

11:45-12:05 Medina as a Late Antique Arabian Sacred Space
Harry Munt (University of York)

12:10-12:30 Discussion | 12:30-14:00 Lunch

Panel 5: The Archaeology of Cult and Death II
Session chair: Juan Manuel Tebes

14:00-14:20 Allat and the Desert. Geographic Approach to the Ancient Religions
Aleksandra Kubiaik-Schneider (University of Wrocław)

14:25-14:45 EAMENA on the Edge: A Remote Sensing Perspective on Funerary Monuments in the Arid Regions of Northern Arabia
Michael Fradley (University of Oxford)

14:50-15:10 Neolithic Desert Cults of Pastoral Nomads in Northern Arabia: The Horn Chamber Mustatil
Wael Abu Azizeh (Lumière University Lyon 2, Archéorient)

15:15-15:35 The Making of Cultic and Funerary Landscapes in Qurayyah, Northwest Arabia
Marta Luciani (University of Vienna)

15:40-16:00 Discussion | 16:00-16:05 Final Remarks