

The role of **Dumat Al-Jandal** in the Kingdom's history has been long recognized. An ongoing SCTA-sponsored project is helping uncover its rich heritage

# Oasis rediscovered

**D**espite being surrounded by neighboring sandstone cliffs and a relatively stable climate, the environment of the Dumat Al-Jandal oasis, situated in Al-Jawf province, has undergone several transformations during the last two millennia of occupation, as attested by recent exploration and archaeological studies

Contrary to what one might think at first glance, the urban and agricultural landscape has undergone changes at each great stage of its history, as indicated by the variations in the site's topography and objects representing pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. The management of natural resources has likewise evolved, reflecting periods of prosperity and stability as well as of recession.

A joint Saudi-Italian-French mission at Dumat Al-Jandal brought together experts from the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, the French National Center for Scientific Research, and the University of Naples L'Orientale. The major aim of the project is to discover the origin and evolution of the oasis, grasp the changing patterns in occupation, and to map the Present settlement in the oasis for the understanding of the history and cultural heritage of Al-Jawf region.

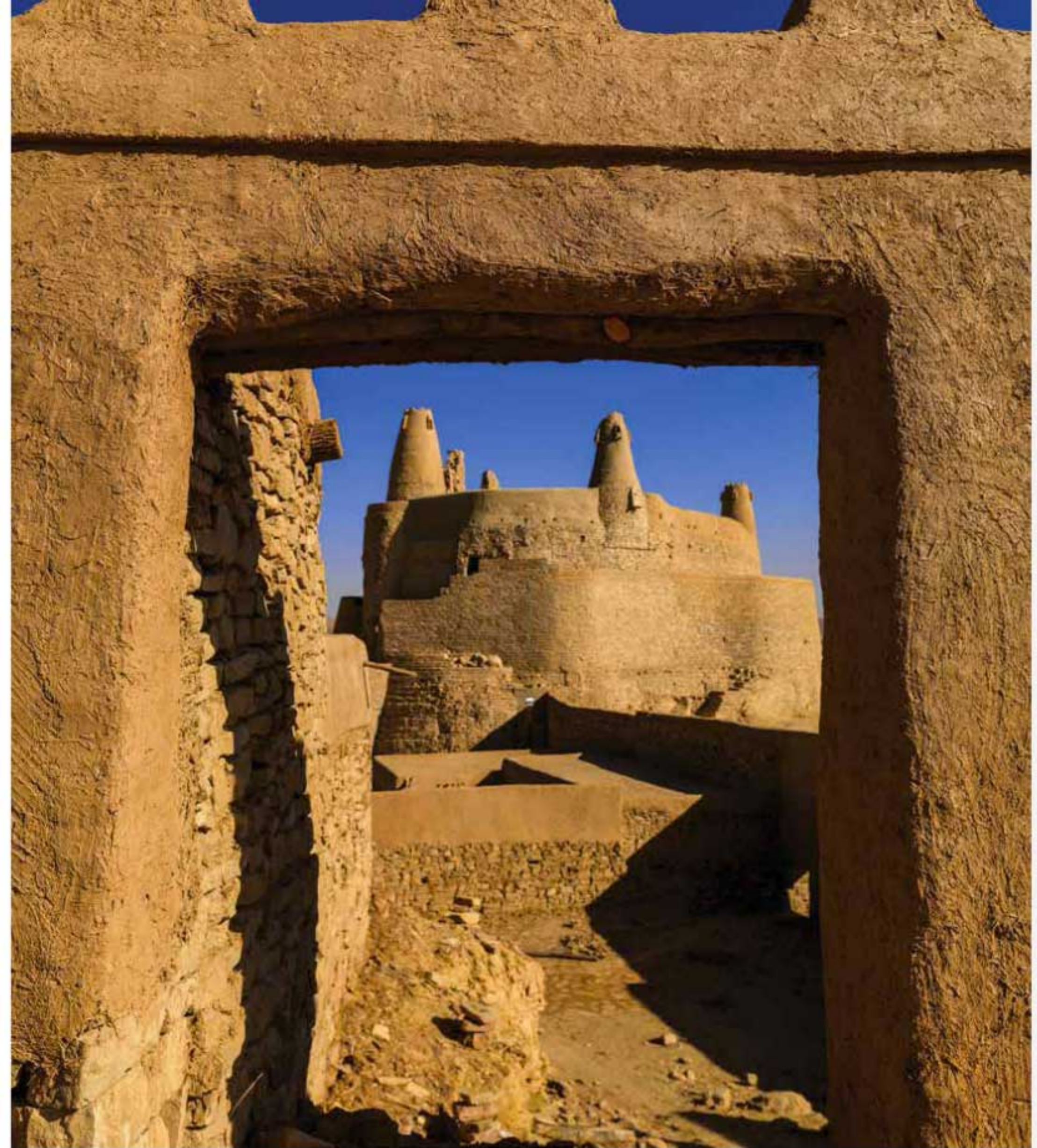
This multi-disciplinary approach of the expertise in numerous specialized fields (archaeologists, archaeobotanist, architects, ceramologists, epigraphers, geologist, historians, speleologists, etc.) made it possible to study the environmental and archaeological entities of the region and focused on the survey of the oasis and of its surroundings, the exploration of ancient hydrological systems, the excavation of ancient remains (and the protection of Saudi heritage, which is inseparable from this aspect of the research), and finally the analysis of the remains of ancient fauna and flora.

Archaeological excavations, which began in 2009, have already helped to explain some of the mysteries of the site's history, in particular its Nabataean and Roman/Ghassanid occupations of almost 2000 years ago. The exposure of a monumental construction at the foot of Qasr Mârid and also the clearing of a Nabataean triclinium (an open-air banquet hall consisting of three benches placed to form a giant U-shaped public space) and the complete ground plan of a gigantic enclosure to the west of the oasis, near the Al-Burj hill, have confirmed the dense Nabataean and Roman/Ghassanid presence at Dumat Al-Jandal. Until now, this presence had only been revealed by some limited inscriptions. However, the apparently continuous occupation of Dumat Al-Jandal at least until the 18th century CE, stands in stark contrast to that visible in the western part of the oasis, interrupted, it seems, after the Roman/Ghassanid period. This simple observation illustrates the significant transformation of the ancient landscape. However, these were not abrupt, as shown by the continuity of animal species found, whether used for subsistence, transport or to draw water from the wells. One can find, in great quantities and at all times, dromedary camels, goats, and sheep.

A number of scientific surveys, carried out previously by the Department of Antiquities and now by our team in the vicinity of the area were aimed to better understanding the environment of the oasis, in particular its hydrography, but also its contacts with the neighboring areas as well as long and middle distance trade routes. Dumat Al-Jandal has long been recognized as an important camping station for the trade caravans moving between the Arabian Gulf and the South Levantine coast, or between Mesopotamia and the Hijaz. Incursions and forays by Neo-Assyrian kings, and occasional conquests of parts of this desert land—particularly the fortress of Adummatu—were certainly the

LEFT QASR MARID IN DUMAT AL JANDAL, LOCATED NEAR THE QMAR IBN AL-KHATTAB MOSQUE









**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** ARIAL VIEW OF OPEN-AIR BENCHES FORMING A U-SHAPED SEATING AREA; MANY SIGNS OF CIVILIZATION ALONG THE EARLY TRADE ROUTES INDICATE THE RELATIVE WEALTH OF CENTRAL ARABIA FROM AS LONG BACK AS NABATAEAN TIMES; FRENCH SPELEOLOGISTS OF INVESTIGATE THE FUNCTIONING OF HYDROLOGICAL TUNNELS, KNOWN AS QANĀTS IN THE AREA OF DUMAT AL-JANDAL; PAINSTAKING SIFTING AND CLEANING IS NECESSARY TO UNCOVER EARLY REMAINS

difficulties associated with the control of the commercial trade routes between Tayma' and Assyria. To this day, no trace of the passage of Mesopotamian kings has been recorded in the area, or in the Al-Jawf region. Rock carvings and prehistoric workshops of flint tool-making from the Neolithic period (the age of the first pastoralists and animal-breeding nomads) formed a large percentage of the sites. There are also numerous rock art sites associated with ancient Arabian Thamudic inscriptions as well as Nabataean and early Arabic texts.

The first stage of archaeological exploration around Dumat Al-Jandal has emphasized the dangers facing the region's sites: the spread of modern construction, the complete reshaping of the pre-modern landscape and, consequently, the destruction of ancient remains. The situation is indeed worrying, despite the repeated efforts of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities. With each year that passes, the ancient landscape is becoming more and more difficult to protect and preserve.

The study of the last remains of the hydraulic system at Dumat Al-Jandal constitutes a priority of the Saudi-Italian-French mission's work. Like every oasis, Dumat Al-Jandal prospered due to the setting up of an elaborate water-

channelling and redistribution system. The recent use of new technologies, particularly the pumping of water from depths of up to 450 meters below ground, has dramatically changed our perception of this system.

During 2012 works in the area, three speleologists (cave explorers) of the French Federation of Speleology (FFS) carried out fieldwork at Dumat Al-Jandal to investigate the functioning of hydrological underground tunnels, known as qanāts, and their entrance shafts. Although nowadays these are mainly clogged, some have managed to remain operational and their exploration has revealed a system that was both complex and monumental. The underground channels dug into the sandstone measure, in some cases, up to 2.5 meters in height and are mainly distributed on a south-west/north-east axis throughout the oasis.

The study of the qanāts and the ancient landscape is an ongoing project. The site's potential, from both an archaeological and touristic viewpoint, is significant and offers huge prospects for the future, subject to development of the sites. It should not be forgotten that heritage is a treasure bequeathed by our ancestors, preserved for our children, and transmitted as an inheritance for the material and spiritual well-being of future generations. ■

*Article co-authored by Guillaume Charloux (CNRS, UMR 8167) and Romolo Loreto of the University of Naples, L'Orientale in collaboration with the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities.*