

# Madain Salih

## Open air museum narrates the history of ancient peoples

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The term Al-Hajir or Al-Hajr, is the name of a city mentioned by Yakout Al-Hamaoui, in his dictionary. It means "quarantine" in Arabic. It can also mean 'reason' or 'forbidden'. Al-Hajr, designates the houses of Thamoud in Al-Qora valley, between Madina and Sham (Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon). Al-Hajr was known as Madain Salih, Salih village or Adal.

### Location

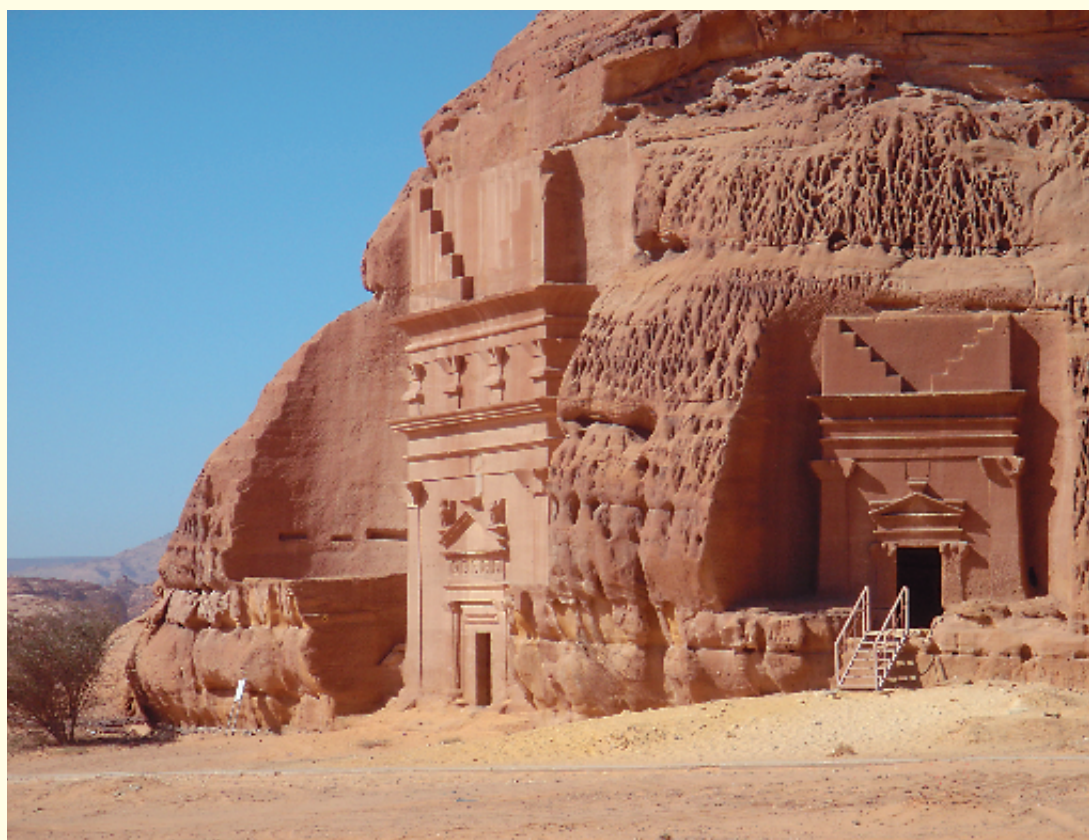
Al-Hajr is 22 km to the northeast of Al-Ala. It is a famous historical site because of its location on the former trade route joining the south of the Arabian Peninsula and Bilade Al-Sham. Its peoples included the Thamoud, who, according to the Koran, rejected the message of Prophet Salih and killed the camel God sent them.

### The ancient history of Al-Hajr

Al-Hajr was favourably disposed to early settlement; it was situated on the caravan route, had an abundant water supply and fertile land. It was also protected by massive rocks. It is not surprising, therefore, that the area was inhabited since ancient times, even if historians have little or no information about the earliest settlers.

The Koran tells us that the Thamoud people lived in Al-Hajr even though there are no historical records to document this. The Lahyanienses occupied Al-Hajr after defeating the Dedanideses. They in turn were defeated by the Nabateenses, who established their first colonies in the north of Jordan and Palestine and played a major role in the region between the 4th and the 2nd century B.C. Some of their remains dating back to the 9th century B.C., have been discovered.

Al-Hajr is also a burial region with 131 cemeteries. Thirty two have been identified as dating from the first year B.C. until the year 75 A.D. The most famous Nabateen kings were Aretas, Al-Harith II, Al-Harith III, Abadat



II, Malek I, Abadat III, Malek II and Malek III.

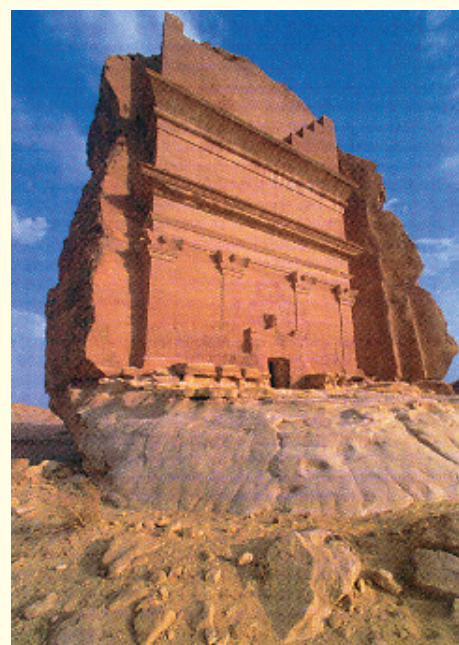
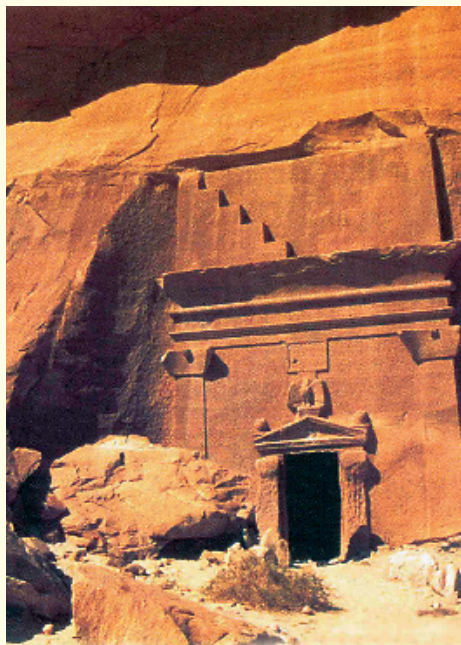
### The Islamic and modern history of Al-Hajr

After the Roman domination of the north of the peninsula, the defeat of the Nabateen kingdom in 106, and the diversion of the trade route towards the Red Sea, Al-Hajr lost its strategic importance as a market place, place of refuge and tax collection point and

the inhabitants left. With the rise of Islam and its spread to the four corners of the earth, there was a renewed interest in trade caravans and pilgrims traveled from Bilad Al-Sham to Mecca, using Al-Hajr as a resting place.

### Prophet Salih and Thamoud

There are 17 references in the holy Koran ➤



to the story of Salih and his people. It describes the Thamoud as people, who carved their dwellings in the mountains, as blessed by God. But they spurned God's blessings and worshipped idols. God sent them the Messenger Salih to urge them to mend their ways. A minority believed in his message, but the majority rejected it and incurred divine punishment.

### Tourist sites

- The area is rich in historical sites including:
- Madain Salih with cemeteries sculpted in the rocks dating back to the Thamoude civilisation - the people of Prophet Salih.
  - Al Khariba, a place where the camel was milked. Mahlab Annaka, is a big basin where, the camel of Salih gave milk to the people, as described in the Koran (The poets - verse 155). Archaeologists believe it is a Nabateen temple.
  - The cemeteries of the lions are sculpted on the rocky facades. The engravings look like lions.
  - Akama mount with an ancient temple at the summit.
  - The ancient settlement of Al Mabiyyat.
  - Railway tracks which indicate Al-Ala was one of the main stations on the pilgrims route from Bilade Al-Sham.
  - Al Mazham, a narrow passage where, according to local mythology, Salih's camel

was killed.

- Al Hawara, a big smooth mountain out of which Salih's camel emerged and where Al Hawar (its calf) took refuge after the camel was killed.

### The eighth wonder of the world

Al-Hajr or Madain Salih, is a magnificent archaeological site, an open air museum covering 13.39km<sup>2</sup> with numerous relics, some still to be discovered. There are temples, stone engravings and ruins, the legacy of the Thamoudienses, the Lahyanienses and the Nabateenses. The former inhabitants of Al-Hajr are buried in 131 cemeteries with domestic tombs including those of the local patriarch and his

family. The cemeteries are so beautiful they are referred to as palaces by the locals who are especially proud of:

- The Palace of Al-Farid: or the Unique palace. It is the only grave in a rocky massif.
- The Palace of Al-Bint in the Al-Khrimat region with lots of graves.
- The Palace of Al-Ajouz in a separate rocky massif in the middle of the sands. One northern facade resembles the facade of the Diwan.
- Ad-Diwan: an irregular, oblong Nabateen temple that has been sculpted in the rocks. The eight meter structure is 12.80 meters by 9.80 meters. ■

\* (We wish to thank Madain Salih Hotel for supplying us with some of the photos for this article).