

## How Archaeology is Enhancing Our Understanding of Identity and Connection across the Ages

Interdisciplinary experts at the 2023 AIUla World Archaeology Summit examine how archaeology helps us better understand and navigate our interconnected world

Of the many assumptions that archaeology has helped us challenge, one of the most profound is the interconnectedness of humanity—across time, vast distances, and seemingly disparate communities. Archaeological discoveries have helped us to reframe how we understand the past and our connections to ancient civilisations, while also enriching our understanding of how we connect with groups and individuals today.

From humanity's earliest days, people have questioned the meaning of their existence. Everlasting inquiries into one's very being and sense of self—posed by ancient philosophers and modern humans alike—are all but variations of the ultimate questions of identity: Who are we? What defines us? How do we relate and connect to the world around us?

Collective identity provides a framework for individuals to understand their own identity in relation to others and broader society. It offers a sense of collective purpose and a shared narrative that guides individual actions and decisions, and their values, norms, beliefs, and goals. At the same time, individual experiences and perspectives contribute to the shaping and evolution of collective identity.

By examining the various factors that contribute to the formation and development of individual and collective identity, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of its far-reaching implications for personal growth, social connections, and the broader human experience.

"We're living in an era where perhaps our knowledge of our origins is expanding more than ever," stated moderator, Nic Robertson, at a session on identity at the AIUla World Archaeology Summit. He posed three questions: How does archaeology shape our identities? How do we interpret earlier nations? And how did our ancestors view their predecessors?

Archaeology, at its core, and as a study of human history across the ages, is inextricably connected to the concept of human identity. As the collective memory of past civilisations is slowly pieced back together from evidence gathered over the years, we can begin to glean a real understanding of how human beings often formed their understanding of themselves and of the societies they belonged to.

As archaeological discoveries shed light on the beliefs, customs, and social structures of past civilisations, they offer a unique window into the formation of human identity. These findings enable us to trace the development of complex cultural systems, explore the interplay between different communities, and appreciate the diversity that has shaped human existence throughout history.



Whether applied to modern sites or ancient ones, archaeology is helping restore and conserve the cultural narratives that might have otherwise been lost in time—and is helping reshape these narratives in more representative and pluralistic ways. Moreover, archaeology emphasises the interconnectedness of past and present identities. By recognising commonalities and shared experiences among ancient societies and our own, we gain a deeper appreciation for the shared heritage that binds us together. This realisation fosters a sense of unity, bridging the gaps between cultures and promoting a more inclusive understanding of human identity. Through this work, we come to understand that collective identity is not a static concept but rather a dynamic one, continually evolving, shifting, and being rewritten over time.

Modern archaeology is helping to challenge preconceived notions and assumptions about identity. By examining the material remains left by past societies, we can identify instances where historical narratives have been shaped by biases, revisionism, or omissions. In doing so, we enable a more accurate and multifaceted understanding of human identity, embracing the complexities, contradictions, and nuances that make each individual and community unique.

In a sense, archaeology can challenge our assumptions about who we think our ancestors are, and by extension, what we think we know about ourselves—but it also gives people a better sense of connection to their past.

During the 2023 AIUla World Archaeology Summit, held in AIUla, Saudi Arabia, this theme of identity stood at the forefront of numerous high-level discussions regarding the present—and future—of the field. The nature of these conversations demonstrate a vital need for modern-day archaeologists to consider how their findings and interpretations impact, and are impacted by, these more complex, nuanced, and pluralistic ideas about identity.

## Rethinking Connections in the Ancient World

AIUla has long stood at a crossroads of the many civilisations that came before us. For thousands of years, the many peoples that passed through this region have shared their cultures, and exchanged goods, services, art, and—perhaps most importantly of all—ideas.

Our understanding of ancient communities and how they were shaped and developed needs to rest on an understanding that they did not do it all in a vacuum. Cultural identity has often been influenced by migration from far-away lands, and archaeologists are able to trace these constant cultural exchanges. Archaeology is helping us build information about cultural and socioeconomic exchange in the ancient world, and it is doing so with the basic understanding that ‘no man is an island’.

Trade routes facilitated the exchange of goods, technologies, and cultural ideas. Artisans, through their travels and interactions, played a crucial role in diffusing artistic styles and knowledge. Pilgrimage routes fostered the transmission of diverse beliefs. Wars and conquests brought about the dissemination of ideas and the fusion of traditions, while occupations by foreign powers introduced new technologies and cultural practices. These interconnected events and more contribute to the formation and transformation of collective human identity throughout history.



AIUla is helping deepen our understanding of the interconnectedness of the ancient Arab world, through research projects focused, for example, on trade and pilgrim routes or tracing genetic connections, and extracting information across projects on the exchange of knowledge and ideas. From India to Egypt, Mesopotamia, Rome, Greece and beyond, AIUla has interfaced with many civilisations and hosted multitudes of people which have left very clear marks on the region.

A prime example of cultural exchange in the region lies at Jabal Ikmaḥ, an 'open-air library' featuring hundreds of engraved and carved inscriptions written—in at least five known ancient languages—across its canyon walls and rock faces. In the names, prayers, apparent ritual, and more mentioned, Jabal Ikmaḥ's writings and petroglyphs offer a glimpse into the life of the ancient peoples of the region. Etchings of camel caravans and musical instruments, for example, tell us of journeys and traditions across the ages. In a riveting session entitled 'Roads of Knowledge: Retracing the Paths of Ancient Arabians' at the 2023 AIUla World Archaeology Summit, Dr. Daifallah al-Talhi, Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at Hail University, shared the story of Hegra, and its intricate ties to cultural oases in northwest Arabia and beyond. The tombs and ruins of the region narrate a rich tale of interlinked and thriving trade and the cultural hubs that have ebbed and flowed over millennia.

The excavations and other studies at Hegra unveil a truly interconnected ancient world. The elaborate tomb façades are a synthesis of architectural vocabulary from Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia and local, combined into an original and distinctive 'Nabataean' expression. Further, while many of the tombs at this ancient site were clearly commissioned by the Nabataean elite, evident in the dedicatory inscriptions, wall writings dating back to Marcus Aurelius' reign in one reveal a partnership between Roman officials and locals, painting a picture of collaboration after the Romans annexed the Nabataean kingdom in 106 CE.

Tombs with similar traits to those at Hegra and Petra have been discovered elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula, but this is rare. "The vast majority of people in the world think of the Nabataeans and they think of Petra. They don't realise that actually that's only a tiny, tiny bit of their kingdom. There's actually a lot more," Dr. Daifallah al-Talhi explained, referring to a network of routes. The distribution of Nabataean inscriptions is a useful indicator.

After the advent of Islam in the 7th century CE and its spread across the world, from the Indian subcontinent to the Iberian Peninsula, unprecedented numbers of peoples, practices, and products began to arrive in Arabia, the political centre of the caliphate. Pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah sustained an enormous and continuous flow of diversity through AIUla, until air and sea travel became the dominant modes of travel and religious pilgrims began to circumvent Northwest Arabia in favour of these new routes.

According to Dr. Khaled Melliti, a historian and researcher at the French Institute of Scientific Research, the field of archaeology has the ability to challenge our existing beliefs. Dr. Melliti specifically mentions that archaeology has greatly contributed to our understanding of life in Ancient Carthage, as much of the literature from the city had completely disappeared. It has allowed a move away from the Hellenistic view of civilization and interest in Carthagian life has been "...renewed, deepened and become professionally compelling".



The journey into the world's archaeological wonders is far from over. The exploration of archaeological sites reveals the rich tapestry of human history and as we venture further, it becomes evident that the interconnectedness and exchange of ideas between different civilisations has long been a persistent force throughout history.

## Connection and Continuity Across Time

Globalisation is far from a new phenomenon. Archaeology highlights the interconnectedness of ancient civilisations, and the ancient routes that paved the way for the globalisation of our modern world. The Incense Road, the Silk Road, the Amber Road, and many more are all examples of globally interconnected trade networks across the many ages of humanity that have been revealed through archaeological study.

Artefacts and ancient texts from seemingly unrelated cultures have been found in uncommon ground, helping researchers construct intricate maps and travel routes trodden by our ancestors. For example, amphorae—used to transport goods such as wine, olive oil, and grains—have been found in many different regions and shipwrecks, indicating the transportation of goods along specific, long-distance trade routes. Similar conclusions can be drawn from other pottery, glassware, fabrics, coins, spices, and other telling evidence found far from their points of origin or production.

This exchange of goods, technologies, and cultural practices in the ancient world laid the foundation for many aspects of our modern societies. For instance, knowledge in the domestication of plants and animals likely spread through ancient travel networks, shaping the development of agricultural practices globally.

It is therefore very hard to ignore the profound effect of travel and trade on the changes within civilisations, and by extension, on the identity of the societies that lay along the major ancient trade routes. Think of the lion tombs at Dadan, for example, where Minaean elite (thought to be prominent merchants) were laid to rest nearly 2,000 kilometres from their origins in southern Arabia—in what was likely a demonstration by the local population of reverence and hospitality towards their guests. The acknowledgment of the complex identities that ancient communities held is a valuable reminder of the importance of recognising and celebrating people's multifaceted identities today.

Dr. Nur Sobers-Khan, Curatorial Head of Collections and Exhibitions Museums Commission at the Ministry of Culture, Saudi Arabia, argued that identity was a “very fluid” concept. “It was a given that you could belong to several places. As you moved along different paths and absorbed those places and their customs you would also carry your culture with you, bring your navigation technologies, your language, and your script and these things would travel and diffuse.”

Furthermore, the interconnectedness of ancient civilisations provides valuable lessons for addressing contemporary global challenges. It offers insights into how diverse societies navigated complex trade relationships, cultural assimilation, and conflicts in the past. Understanding these historical dynamics can help inform strategies for managing cultural diversity, promoting sustainable economic systems, and fostering peaceful international relations in the present day.



We have drawn on the lessons of our ancestors in the ways they managed complex trade relationships and cultural assimilation, avoiding conflicts that could arise from cultural differences. One example is the Maritime Silk Road—an ancient trading route that connected China and Europe from around 200 BCE to the 14th century—in which diplomats from different regions negotiated consensus to ensure the mutual benefit of trade among regions. The study of archaeological sites along the Silk Road, such as Dunhuang in China, also reveals the extensive cultural and economic exchanges between East Asia, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean world.

With the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE, the medieval town of Qurh—just a short distance south of modern-day AIUla—quickly arose as one of the most significant settlements along the early Hajj pilgrimage route. Archaeological findings from the site, particularly ceramics, reveal a wide range of origins. These foreign materials were often inspiration for local artisans and craftspeople, who were influenced by the cultures they came in touch with through their trade routes.

The emphasis on local and regional trade networks prevalent in many ancient societies may well have also set the scene for the fair-trade policies we have in place today. Through the promotion of local or regional production and trade, we can help to create more sustainable and resilient economic systems that benefit local communities and support environmental sustainability.

## Climate Change and Human Migration

During a panel at the AIUla World Archaeology Summit, entitled 'Archaeology Weaves an Interconnected World,' experts discussed how historical climate change and its resulting movement of people has had a significant impact on human identity.

"You can see this in the submerged landscapes that were once on dry land and I'd not be surprised if we find a lot more that is buried under the sea, not too far from here," says Dr. Pierre Zalloua, Professor at Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi. "Look around us. What's happening today in the world? Temperatures are changing, floods are happening. We will be moving too." By examining archaeological heritage sites through the lens of their similarities to contemporary global issues, archaeologists are facilitating these identity-bridging connections between humanity's past, present, and future.

## The Archaeology of Modernity and Identity Building

In archaeology, we learn that the study of past peoples from hundreds to hundreds of thousands of years ago helps inform our understanding of contemporary culture and modern life. On a long enough timeline, the entirety of human existence can be viewed as a speck in time when we think about the vast history of the earth, and we realise that, perhaps, we are not so different or far removed from our early ancestors as we think.

Experts from Europe and South America at the inaugural AIUla World Archaeology Summit discussed the personal, emotional impact that the destruction of archaeological sites or antiquities has had on them.



Dr. Alfredo González-Ruibal, from the Institute of Heritage Sciences and Spanish National Research Council, explains, “As archaeologists, we are trained to relate to the people of the past because we care for their things, which means we care for the people that made and used these things. When things disappear, part of the people of the past disappears as well.”

One of the key ways in which archaeological practice changes is through the adoption of a more engaged and participatory approach. Instead of solely being conducted by archaeologists, research becomes a collaborative effort that involves active participation from community members—shaped by their concerns, interests, and perspectives. It transforms the approach to studying the past, and acknowledges the significant role that communities play in preserving and understanding their cultural heritage, recognising their invaluable contributions to archaeological research.

Anita Mendiratta, Strategic Advisor, Anita Mendiratta & Associates emphasised how archaeology can be the study of places and objects “that don’t have dust on them yet.” Many archaeologists are studying the modern ruins of societies affected by fairly recent natural disasters (like Hurricane Katrina), or the evolution of the modern world, like the Spanish villages abandoned during the last century in favour of life in nearby, prosperous cities. These efforts are proof that the past, recent or not, has a hand in shaping our identity and even illuminating our futures, building a bridge between our modern world and an interconnected ancient world.

Dr. Dante Angelo, Assistant Professor at the University of Tarapacá, talked about his experience in his home country of Chile, where immigrants and other people on the fringes of society inhabit historical buildings. This is one of the ways the past continues to inform the present and present learnings for the future. He said: “It also speaks about what’s going on right now, and how we can face the challenges of that.”

Traditionally, archaeology has been viewed through a nationalistic lens, but now that we see so many examples of the interconnectedness of ancient cultures, those ideas are shifting towards a more shared view of our past. Because archaeology has been a largely Western-dominated field, it has been critical to entities like the Royal Commission for AIUla—an institution sensitively and sustainably transforming the region as part of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030—to work towards changing this narrative, integrating the values of the local residents into the preservation work and proactively involving them in restoration efforts.

AIUla’s Old Town is a fascinating site that was inhabited for over eight centuries—from at least the 12th century CE until as recently as the 1980s. Prior to that, Qurh was the primary settlement in the AIUla valley, from just before Islam emerged until AIUla’s Old Town took over as the local keystopping point along the Syrian pilgrimage route to Makkah (circa 7th to 12th centuries CE). It is the old and well-preserved structures and artefacts of continually renewed and occupied sites like this that enable us to examine the development of a culture and its collective identity.

For local resident and archaeologist Mutlaq AlMutlaq, there is a visceral connection to these remnants of the past. “When I am talking about history and artefacts, I imagine that all the people from that time are living there—that they are present,” he says. “I imagine them having conversations in their language.”



A major conservation project of the Royal Commission for AlUla, the Old Town, is undergoing an active revival process. As part of its renaissance, and its transformation into a living museum, the collective oral histories and traditions of Old Town's former residents are being collected and catalogued for future generations. Rawis, or storytellers, act as local guides, carrying with them a wealth of knowledge from the region's past to pass onto future generations; the parents of many even grew up there.

It is the stories of the people of AlUla that are breathing life into its Living Museum. While archaeologists understand the 'when', 'what', and 'how' of the history of the region, it is the local historians that are helping answer the 'why'. This collective, shared identity will be a co-curated experience between the experts and the local community, giving us a window into the region's past, and helping solidify in our minds the intangible heritage of AlUla's people and identity.

Archaeology plays a crucial role in unravelling the intricate tapestry of human identity. By excavating ancient sites, analysing artefacts, and interpreting cultural practices, archaeologists provide valuable insights into the past that help shape our understanding of who we are as individuals and as members of a larger society.

The ways in which ancient people interacted with one another and exchanged items and ideas have helped shape and evolve societies, and contributed greatly to the innovation process and the exponential advancement of modern technology.

Archaeology serves as a powerful tool for exploring and understanding human identity. Through its in-depth examination of past peoples, it not only reveals the myriad ways in which societies have identified throughout history, but also prompts us to critically examine our own contemporary notions of identity. By bringing the past to the present, archaeology enables us to construct a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of who we are as human beings.