

## Culture

## New Dubai museum points to Iron Age mysteries

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai

Dubai has unveiled dramatic archaeological findings that point to thousands of years of human activity at Saruq al-Hadid, a remote site in the Emirate Quarter desert, 70km south of Dubai, resetting the beginnings of history in the emirate.

The findings, dating to 3,000-4,000 years ago, are the earliest signs of occupation. The site was discovered in 2002 by Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum during a helicopter ride when he noticed the unusual shapes of the dunes and the colour of the sands.

"We began formal digging in 2002 and started finding pieces of iron and various objects like swords, pottery and even gold at only 8 metres below," said Rashad Mohammed Bukhash, director of Architectural Heritage Department at Dubai Municipality.

**Some 900 items from the site are displayed at Saruq al-Hadid Museum in Dubai's Shindagha Heritage Village.**

"Surprisingly, many of these items are found at the surface level. During Ramadan this year, we did not carry out any excavation. When we went there later, the team found around 60 items on the surface."

Bukhash said he thinks what was found is a tiny part of what is yet to be discovered. "Over 14 years, our team dug up an area of 2x2 km and what we have excavated so far is less than 5%. We have already

found 13,000 pieces at the rate of 20 to 30 new pieces a day, which means that around 100,000 pieces are still down there," he said.

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Bukhash said that only the "industrial part" of a big city has been excavated. "Next to the initial site, there is a UAE Army base where we started some digging work and found more items related to daily living," he said. "We believe the living quarters may be in that adjoining spot and hope to confirm this by October this year."

One of the mysteries surrounding Saruq al-Hadid is the identity of its inhabitants, their language, religious customs and burial grounds, mode of transport, clothing and eating habits. "Those are the secrets we are looking for and hoping to find out," Bukhash said.

Items displayed at Saruq al-Hadid Museum include carnelian beads (semi-precious gemstone from the Indus Valley), heavy anklets (probably used on domesticated camels), finely decorated shells, bronze incense burners with feet in the shape of the hooves of a bull (in the Mesopotamian style), daggers and swords with handle decoration of pouncing lion (a motif from Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean), many bronze snakes and a gold snake in addition to a gold gazelle that was probably part of a necklace.

Also on display are Stone Age tools, including hand axes and scrapes that reveal the earliest evidence of human activity at Saruq al-Hadid.

The presence of olive wood objects points to possible links with Syria. The distinct design features on objects found at the site could signal that inhabitants were in

contact with civilisation centres as far away as the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Dilmun in modern day Bahrain, and Oman.

The research team has come up with several theories, including that it was a secret military manufacturing facility. Other possibilities are that it was a community with savannah-like conditions and that it was a major trading centre, linking the ancient trade routes to Oman, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Afghanistan and India.

**Archaeologists from Australia, Spain and Germany, along with the Dubai team, are involved in the excavation and research.**

"We have evidence of burning for more than 1,000 years for which enormous amounts of wood should have been available," Bukhash said. "We are doing a lot of research and piecing together the evidence. Between 1,300BC and 800BC, large numbers of metal objects, including tools and weapons were produced at Saruq al-Hadid on an industrial scale – leaving huge quantities of slag – now visible on the surface of the desert area. We have also found 4,500 arrowheads here."

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There are up to 45 people, including 35 labourers, at the site. Bukhash said authorities decided to double that number by next year and employ teams from Italy, the Czech Republic and Switzerland.

N.P. Krishna Kumar is a Dubai-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.



A gold gazelle – probably a pendant or part of a necklace – displayed at the museum.

## Kelibia hosts Tunisian amateur film festival

Roua Khelifi

Kelibia

The open-air movie theatre hosting the International Amateur Film Festival of Kelibia (FIFAK) brimmed with cinema fans when the festival opened in early August.

For many young Tunisians, the festival is not just about cinema; it is a cultural ritual that encompasses many forms of art and entertainment. On the opening evening, some teenagers argued about the best place to camp for the night. Another group put the final touches on their performance. Others, the locals of the town, were flocking to the venue along with their families to watch the movies.

Kelibia, 115km east of Tunis, has been the site of the festival since 1964, welcoming thousands of people each year. Organised by the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Film-makers (FTCA), the festival is dedicated to promoting alternative cinema, a politically activist expression of film.

"This year, we tried to work on a different approach, which is to occupy the public space in Kelibia," said Tarek Sardi, a member of the directing committee and general secretary in charge of production. "We wanted to open the space more than usual. We attempted to create parallel programmes and dedicated parts of the activities to the people, the locals to get their attention and not just for the festival goers."

"For instance, the festival includes street art shows this year which attracted people from all different walks of life. Everyone came to watch the street shows."

This year's edition featured about 80 films from 23 countries, with 50



films competing in the international category and 26 films in the national category. The opening night film paid tribute to Syria with Ghatfan Ghanoom's *Moon in the Skype*.

The Golden Falcon – the event's biggest award – was given to *Blue*, a Syrian-Palestinian entry by Abo Gabi Bidayyat. Second place in the international competition was voted to *Solo* by Nayara Alsarwy from Egypt and third place was taken by Tunisian independent film-maker, Malek Khmiri for *Triton, Hunter of Sound*.

Houcem Cherif from Hamamet won the top prize in the national competition for *Cat Town*. Second place went to Youssef el-Behi's and Halim Jerbi's *One of Us*. They are from Hammam-Lif. The third prize was awarded to Sfax's Majdi Kaanich for his *Auctioned Islands*.

*Slide*, by Malak Abd Ali from Iraq, won the jury award and special mentions were given to Argentinian film *Vendeval* by Mariana Rojas and the Moroccan film *Whispers of Venus* by Ghislaine Assif.

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"The films selected comply with the federation's main constituent: We don't accept mainstream commercial films but we work on the engaged," Sardi said. "The goal is to promote cinema committed to the issues of the people. It is a festival for committed cinema."

"Our conviction is that the festival is here to guide, to change

things, to raise awareness, to be a part of a community that supports you before you support yourself."

In addition to films and street art, the festival offered a variety of workshops.

"The workshops are open to all. This year, we doubled the number of workshops and invited film-makers from different countries to animate them. They brought the knowledge and aesthetics," Sardi said.

"This year we also worked on themes as we have workshops on gender, sexual politics, mental and physical border as well as workshops for the shadows theatre."

The festival is one of the oldest film festivals in Africa. It has a long history of activism and was subject to censorship and state control before the revolution. Today, howev-

er, the festival enjoys a large margin of freedom of expression.

While the festival promotes independent cinema that tackles social, political and economic causes, it also provides young film-makers a venue to showcase their work.

Many of them have been attending the festival from an early age. Such is the case of Sahar el-Echi, who has been a member of the workshop for children's cinema since 2003. She participated in the national competition with her film *Mutation*, a sarcastic portrait of the stereotypes of activists in Tunisia before and after the revolution.

"The festival is a school of life before being a school of cinema and amateur cinema. In my opinion, the message will be transmitted in a clearer way without complicating the story through audiovisual means. I want to simplify the idea to the person watching, to simplify the complicated aspect," Echi explained.

"I chose to work on the change of the revolutionary figure of Tunisian activists... I worked on painting the contrast before and after the 14th of January. The film traces the mutation of the character. It is a mutated character that adapted to the changes of social and political and is no longer authentic."

Every night, hundreds of people attended screenings.

"The turnout has exceeded all of our expectations this year," Sardi said. "The festival is primordial for Tunisia. It is the nest for Tunisian youth to be guided to reconstruct to see a different reality, to discover things."

"The festival is still standing despite all as long as the federation is here and as long as cinema clubs are working. This festival is built on a democratic structure that will sustain itself. We are all equal and all of our voices are heard here."