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Um Al Jimal to Go Virtual Under New Initiative

By Taylor Luck

AMMAN - The past, present and future of the basalt city of Um Al Jimal will go virtual under a new preservation initiative.

The Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) has provided Um Al Jimal with a site preservation grant to utilise education and social outreach to raise awareness on the site to ensure its long-term preservation.



Um Al Jimal, a basalt city that was inhabited from the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods, will go virtual under a new project. (Photo by Taylor Luck)

The grant, which was awarded last week, will support the efforts of the Um Al Jimal Project, led by Bert de Vries of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to bolster archaeological research, cultural heritage preservation and community development.

Continuously occupied from the 1st through the 9th centuries covering the early Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods, Um Al Jimal is currently threatened by neglect and a lack of shared ownership, according to experts.

For the initiative, de Vries is teaming up with Open Hand Studios, a Chicago-based not-for-profit organisation for community development, to establish a virtual museum and educational centre for future education, outreach and development opportunities in the area, some 90 kilometres northeast of Amman.

“This virtual museum and educational centre will create new bridges between and among local residents, Jordanian citizens, and the international public,” de Vries told The Jordan Times via e-mail.

The online centre will include a virtual site tour and exhibit, allowing for people across the Kingdom and the world to tour Um Al Jimal and raise awareness on threats to the ancient city.

The immersive virtual site tour of Um Al Jimal will use 360° virtual reality photography embedded with audio, video and still images, he said. Each point of the virtual tour will correspond to a physical place at the site and will be complemented with an online exhibit of objects, inscriptions, ceramics and other physical materials recovered from Um Al Jimal.

“The project’s availability via the Web will allow interested people from around the world to visit Um Al Jimal, even if they are unable to physically travel to Jordan,” he added.

The interactive tour and virtual museum will be available on the project’s website at www.ummeljimal.org.

The AIA grant will also support the integration of Um Al Jimal into the national curriculum, a project being carried out by de Vries’ team in cooperation with the Ministry of Education that will be applied in public schools across the country. The initiative will encourage the use of the virtual tour and educational curriculum through a variety of complementary information available via the website including an oral history archive of video interviews and information about the site’s modern reoccupation, according to project organisers.

The shared curriculum, which is to be applied both in the Kingdom and the US will give American and Jordanian students alike the chance to learn about Um Al Jimal, de Vries said.

Originally a Nabataean village built in the 1st century AD, the town became a military outpost along the Via Traiana Nova after it was incorporated into the Roman Empire, serving as part of a series of fortifications defending Roman-occupied territory stretching to the borders of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

Byzantine churches were built on the site during the 5th and 6th centuries, while its stone barracks, water cisterns and administrative buildings were gradually converted back to a rural village under Umayyad rule around the 7th century.

After an earthquake devastated the area in 749AD, the basalt fortifications were left abandoned for around 1,000 years until a Druze community briefly inhabited the city around the turn of the 20th century.

The city, which includes Nabataean, Greek, Latin and Arabic inscriptions, has been nominated for the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list.

Future plans for the site include the establishment of a cultural heritage centre in the village to highlight the modern community as the last phase in the archaeological history of Um Al Jimal, de Vries said.

According to the archaeologist, the centre will be designed and operated by a committee of citizens in partnership with Um Al Jimal Municipality.

It will serve as a modern history museum, a lecture and video-presentation hall, a regional handicraft hub, an archaeological and cultural education centre, a hostel and a community hall for wedding receptions and other gatherings, he added.

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