

# Google Earth reveals ancient stone gates in Saudi Arabia

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Credit: University of Western Australia

A researcher at The University of Western Australia has used Google Earth imagery to identify almost 400 previously undocumented stone structures known as 'Gates' in Saudi Arabia.

Professor David Kennedy, a researcher in Classics and Ancient History, said while we tended to think of Saudi Arabia as largely barren mountains and desert, it was also home to an immense number of archaeological sites that were yet to be identified, recorded and mapped.

"You can't see them in any intelligible way at the ground level but once you get up a few hundred feet, or with a satellite even higher, they stand out beautifully," Professor Kennedy said.

His findings are described in a research paper to be published next month in the journal *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*.

Professor Kennedy said he was baffled when he first saw this particular site type on the satellite images – despite some 40 years working on the [archaeology](#) of 'Arabia', they were unlike anything he had seen before.

"I refer to them as Gates because when you view them from above they look like a simple field gate lying flat, two upright posts on the sides, connected by one or more long bars," he said.

"They don't look like structures where people would have lived nor do they look like animal traps or for disposing of dead bodies. It's a mystery as to what their purpose would have been."

Since 1997, Professor Kennedy has flown in helicopters over Saudi Arabia's neighbour Jordan, photographing tens of thousands of stone-built structures scattered over its lava field or 'harrat'. Shapes range from giant circles of stone that may be 400m across to Kites (animal traps), Pendants (funerary monuments), Wheels (unknown) and many more."

Not much is known about the people who built the edifices, but they are thought to have constructed them 2,000 to 9,000 years ago, according to Professor Kennedy. They are believed to be the ancestors of the modern-day Beduin in the region who describe them collectively as 'The Works of Old Men'.

Thanks to a succession of generous grants from The Packard Humanities Institute (2008-2017), Professor Kennedy's team has recorded thousands of archaeological sites in Jordan and the Middle East. The Oxford-educated academic specialises in the Near East and aerial archaeology. He established the Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (APAAME) in 1978, and has jointly directed the Aerial

Archaeology in Jordan (AAJ) project since 1997.

Professor Kennedy was founding director (with Oxford colleagues Robert Bewley and Andrew Wilson) of the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) project. The EAMENA team is working to record a heritage that has been threatened over many years by development and is now in the firing line of civil and foreign wars and the victim of looters.

**More information:** *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*.  
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1111/ISSN1600-0471](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1111/ISSN1600-0471)

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