

Villa Hegra
In partnership with
the French Research Center of the Arabian Peninsula (CEFREPA)

Call for projects
“AlUla: transformations and social dynamics of a development project”

Context :

During the visit of the President of the French Republic to Saudi Arabia in December 2021, the two countries signed an agreement for the creation of a cultural institution in AlUla: Villa Hegra.

Supporting contemporary creation, particularly in the fields of visual arts, film, and performance arts, it aims to be a space open to creativity, education, and exchange. By fostering dialogue between the AlUla community and international audiences, Villa Hegra creates opportunities for expression while contributing to the region's cultural influence.

Since 2023, Villa Hegra has been developing a program including residencies, performances, workshops, exhibitions, exchange programs, and research. In 2025, the Villa's temporary site will open in the heart of AlUla. The founding entities of Villa Hegra are AFALULA (French Agency for the Development of AlUla) and the RCU (Royal Commission for AlUla).

Villa Hegra is located in the center of the main city of AlUla, in northwestern Saudi Arabia, in an oasis combining a human settlement and a cultivated area. AlUla's surface area is equivalent to that of the Hauts-de-France region or the PACA region. AlUla currently has approximately 50,000 inhabitants and expects its population to triple by 2030, as part of the destination promotion efforts implemented by the Royal Commission for AlUla.

In partnership with IISMM (CNRS and EHESS) and CEFREPA (CNRS and MEAE), Villa Hegra launched a call for seed projects in April 2024 for research on the dynamics induced by the development of the city and the oasis, the effects of this development on the inhabitants of the site and its region, and the social and economic transformations. Five interdisciplinary projects involving international researchers were selected: the list of these projects can be viewed [here](#). Each received a one-year grant of €30,000.

Following this seed phase, Villa Hegra, in partnership with CEFREPA, is launching a new call for research projects in the humanities and social sciences (anthropology, geography, history, linguistics, musicology, political science, sociology, urban planning) to continue studying the development of the city and oasis of AlUla and its past and present social and economic transformations.

The purpose of this call is to support a three-year research project in the humanities and social sciences, led by a team including established researchers and young researchers (doctoral or postdoctoral, in the form of a grant). It is not necessary to have participated in one of the seed projects to propose a project.

1. Project guidelines

The call for projects is part of Villa Hegra's research and academic exchanges stream, which is one of the institution's priority areas. It echoes several academic research projects already conducted in the region over the past five years, and in particular those that responded to the 2024 call for proposals.

Among its objectives, the project will analyze the social effects of the public policies implemented by the Royal Commission for AlUla. It may incorporate a comparative dimension to compare the development of the AlUla site with other examples of past and contemporary development projects in similar spaces and environments, in order to compare experiences and draw useful hypotheses and lessons.

The inclusion of Saudi researchers in the research team is essential. Collaboration with Saudi research institutions is also highly desirable.

Transdisciplinarity is an essential selection criterion for the successful project. Applicant teams are also required to include a musicological component in their projects.

Since archaeology projects are already integrated into other programs supported by the Agency, they are not eligible for this call for projects.

2. Identified research themes

The project's research areas may include the following four themes identified by the Agency as being particularly anticipated by the stakeholders in the ongoing development in AlUla. They may be supplemented by additional research themes, the relevance of which for AlUla will be explained by the project leader(s).

Economic and environmental dynamics

- Traditional agricultural economic structures and their transformations;
- Investments and diversification of activities;
- New ways of participating in globalization;
- Regional and global networks that support the ongoing transformations;
- Stakeholders involved in tourism development at the local and national levels.

Transformations of the rural and urban landscape

- Daily practices of Bedouin and sedentary populations;
- Heritage and new perspectives on agricultural practices;
- Investments in urban development;
- New forms of housing and residential developments;
- Development of cultural, entertainment, hotel, and restaurant infrastructure.

Cultural heritage and living production

- Literary and musical traditions;
- Collection and preservation of cultural heritage;

- Heritage creation and its challenges;
- Creation and promotion of archives;
- Dynamics of cultural production.

Societal perspectives

- Presence or development of a collective memory surrounding the history of AlUla;
- Transformations in demographic and social structures in the oasis;
- Challenges of training residents of the AlUla site and its surrounding region (openness to foreign languages; knowledge of heritage; mastery of tour guide practices);
- Development of entrepreneurship and prospects;
- Interactions with populations from other regions of Saudi Arabia;
- Consequences of the long-term presence of foreign visitors and residents.

3. Recipients, duration and location

The project is intended for a team of at least five researchers, including a project leader (hereinafter referred to as the "**project leader**") who must be a permanent scientific staff member working for a CNRS unit (or European equivalent).

The project will run for a period of three years from the date the project is awarded to the project leader. As part of the research, the project leader and their team will be required to spend several weeks or even months in AlUla periodically.

4. Project eligibility and evaluation criteria

Projects must be led by at least one permanent scientific staff member from a CNRS unit (or European equivalent).

Successful projects must plan a three-year research program and present their results annually in the form of a report and an interim study day, and then, at the end of the three-year period, in the form of a final report accompanied by a scientific event to showcase their work and discuss it with European and Saudi partners.

Projects will be selected by a scientific committee convened by CEFREPA management and comprising international (notably French and Saudi researchers). The composition of this committee will be made public before the end of the application period.

The jury will make the selection based on various criteria, including:

- An explanation of the project's scientific relevance in terms of advancing knowledge, methodology (field data collection and analysis), and possible scientific collaboration with other ongoing research projects;
- The project's relevance and potential impact on the various stakeholders involved in ongoing development in AlUla;

- Its interdisciplinary nature;
- The project's ability to integrate Saudi researchers, individually and/or institutionally;
- The participation of young researchers;
- The avenues considered for promoting the research to European and Saudi audiences, particularly the RCU;
- A precise justification for the amount of funding requested.

5. Financial allocation and support

The selected research project will receive a maximum grant of €255,000, the credit of which will be allocated to the project leader. This amount will be paid to and managed by CEFREPA. The grant must be used within three years of payment. Management fees may apply. Expenses may include travel expenses, operating costs, equipment costs (excluding standard IT and office equipment), and project-related services.

The parties to the research project contract will be the Agency, CEFREPA, and the selected project leaders.

6. Deliverables

Project leaders undertake to communicate the results of their team's work in French and English, and possibly in Arabic if the team's capacity allows, in three forms:

- An interim annual report including a scientific review of the year (approximately 50 pages or 75,000 to 100,000 characters, including a 3- to 5-page executive summary, a review of the activities carried out, an explanation of the research hypotheses and a state of knowledge at the end of the year, scientific perspectives for the project team and possible collaborations and comparisons to be considered) and a financial report; the third-year report will be a final report (approximately 100 pages or 150,000 to 200,000 characters).
- A conference or workshop to present/return the work at the end of each year of research, in AlUla and/or in France;
- A presentation workshop or study day at the end of each year, organized by the Agency and CEFREPA in Saudi Arabia and France; this scientific event will take the form of a final presentation at the end of the third year.

The report will be the subject of a scientific publication so that the researchers involved publish part of their work in a French, Saudi, or international scientific journal. In light of the analysis resulting from the report, the project leader may be invited to formulate recommendations to be made to the governance of Villa Hegra, the Agency, and the RCU. The evaluation of the social impact of the public policies promoted by the Royal Commission for AlUla, which is currently being developed, will indeed

be part of the analysis. The implementation of forms of promotion accessible to various, non-specialist audiences will be appreciated.

7. Ethics

The selection of candidate projects will respect the ethical principles promoted by the CNRS (fairness, freedom of research, freedom of publication).

The project leaders of the selected projects will undertake to acknowledge the funding received ("This project has received financial support from Villa Hegra") in all scientific or artistic productions and media (articles, books, publications, films, exhibitions, etc.).

8. Calendar

The call for applications opens on June 20, 2025.

First stage: Submission of applications by September 30, 2025.

Second stage: Project leaders of selected projects will be informed of the jury's selection by October 31, 2025.

9. Submission Terms

Applicant teams must submit their application in PDF format to the following email address: assistance-direction@cefrepa.cnrs.fr and eleonore.mortier@ehess.fr

The deadline for submitting applications is September 30, 2025, at midnight (Paris time).

Under penalty of inadmissibility, the application must include the following documents:

1. Full names of the members of the project team, including the project leader(s) and team leader(s), their area of specialization, and their institution of affiliation;
2. A brief description (approximately 5,000 words) of the research proposal, including an overview of the fields under consideration, the formulation of exploratory hypotheses, the identification of specific annual and multi-year objectives over three years, an explanation of the potential impacts and benefits for the development of the AIUla site, and ways of exploiting the expected results;
3. Provisional timeline;
4. Provisional budget allocation schedule.

10. Useful links

- Villa Hegra
- The French Agency for the Development of AlUla (AfAlula) <https://www.afalula.com/>
- The Royal Commission of AlUla: <https://www.rcu.gov.sa/>
- The Oasis of AlUla <https://archeologie.culture.gouv.fr/monde/fr/habiter-oasis-al-ula>

Appendices

I. Current research projects

Project name	Objectives	Institutes/organizations	Start/End date	Advancement	Communications & publications
Knowing Soil for a better understanding of its Functioning to improve LAND uses and preservation in Al-'Ula (SoFunLand)	<p>Produce knowledge on biodiversity and soil functioning in arid environments in order to propose innovative solutions for soil management, enabling sustainable agricultural use and the preservation of natural ecosystems in the Al-'Ula region.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Al-'Ula soil atlas - identification of microbial markers as a tool for understanding past human activities- outils opérationnel et recommandations pour chaque sol 	<p>CIRAD MNHN Valorhiz (PME)</p>	<p>November 2019 - September 2023 (Before extension)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Field phases and finalized (or quasi-finalized) laboratory analyses to: characterize the biodiversity of soil microorganisms in relation to the physico-chemical characteristics of the soil and its use; identify microbial markers of past human activities; study the contributions of microorganisms to ecosystem functioning. - Interpretation of results, modeling and valorization in progress. - Collaborations with Saudi partners: KSU (King Saud University), KAUST (King Abdullah 	<p>6 communications</p> <p><i>Coming soon :</i> <i>4 articles</i> <i>2 communications</i></p>

				University of Science and Technology)	
Anthropological survey of Al-'Ula community and its oasis system (AS)	<p>Anthropological study to understand the functioning of the socio-ecosystem of the Al-'Ula oasis and its recent evolution in a development context, to enable a relevant choice of agrobiodiversity conservation strategies and possibilities of intervention on agricultural practices, particularly in irrigated agriculture.</p> <p>- definition of Al-'Ula's originality as an oasis</p> <p>- assessment of local agrobiodiversity and its origins- approche mixte anthropologie, ethnobotanique et agronomie</p>	<p>CNRS</p> <p>MNHN</p>	<p>September 2019</p> <p>-</p> <p>September 2023</p> <p>(before extension)</p>	<p>- Cross-sectional survey of the oasis: obtaining a description of the social organization and analysis of oasis spaces.</p> <p>- Agronomic and ethnoecological frame of reference: initial field data obtained, further studies to come.</p>	<p>2 articles published</p> <p>5 communications</p> <p><i>Coming soon :</i></p> <p><i>3 articles</i></p> <p><i>1 communication</i></p>
Ethnographic, genetic and morphometric analyses of the date palm agrobiodiversity in Al-'Ula oasis (DPA)	<p>- Assessment of the present and past diversity of date palms in Al-'Ula, points of view ethnological, morphological and genetic</p> <p>- Understanding its origins and evolution over time</p>	<p>CNRS</p> <p>MNHN</p> <p>NYU Abu-Dhabi</p>	<p>September 2019</p> <p>-</p> <p>October 2023</p>	<p>- finalized field sampling</p> <p>- sample sequencing in progress</p> <p>- phase 1 (field) ethnobotanical survey finalized, framework for interpretation of genetic analyses produced</p>	<p>1 article published</p> <p>6 communications</p> <p><i>Coming soon :</i></p>

	- Generating knowledge about local germplasm and its history, as a source of information for oasis conservation, improvement and sustainable development programs.			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - genetic analyses finalized for the “barni” date variety - morphometric analyses of date palm seeds in progress. - Collaborations with Saudi partners: KAUST (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology) 	<i>6 articles</i>
High Value Citrus For Al-'Ula (HVCA)	Support for the development of a quality citrus industry in Al-'Ula, by helping to understand the phenomena that influence quality (sanitary, varietal, good agricultural and irrigation practices) and by strengthening the capacity of the citrus growers on these aspects.	CIRAD INRAE ANSES MAS Bachès (nursery) AgroProspective (PME)	September 2020 - September 2023 (before extension)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complete sanitary diagnosis of Al-'Ula orchards; - Understanding local varietal diversity (including genetic analysis); - Introduction of new varieties and monitoring of their performance; Reception of Saudi trainees (scholarship program de la RCU) every year at CRB San Giuliano (Corsica); -Collaboration with KAUST 	1 communication <i>Coming soon :</i> 1 article 2 communications

II. Provisional schedule

Year N

Months 1-2 :

- Project planning.
- Development of research methodology.
- Literature review and document collection.
- Preparation of data collection tools.
- Obtain visas and permits for field research.

Months 3-12 :

- Field surveys and data collection.
- Drafting of interim report.

Year N+1

Months 13-18 :

- Presentation of interim report
- Continued data collection in the field.

Months 19-24 :

- In-depth analysis of collected data.
- Drafting of the final research report in French and English.

- Preparation for the presentation workshop.

Year N+2

Months 25-30 :

- Finalize final report.
- Final report sent to jury.
- Evaluation by the jury.
- Workshop to present research results.

III. Example of a research project budget estimate

SECTION	BUDGET
Field research costs	EUR
Travel costs (air tickets, visas, local transport, accommodation)	EUR
Per diem for on-site researchers and assistants	EUR
Data collection costs (equipment, research materials)	EUR
Salary for research team (x researchers) for the duration of the project	EUR
Publication and dissemination costs	EUR
Scientific publication of final report (optional)	EUR
Other research-related expenses	EUR
Administrative expenses	EUR

