

# Al-Fau & Kinda Kingdom

## Fascinating Desert Ruins

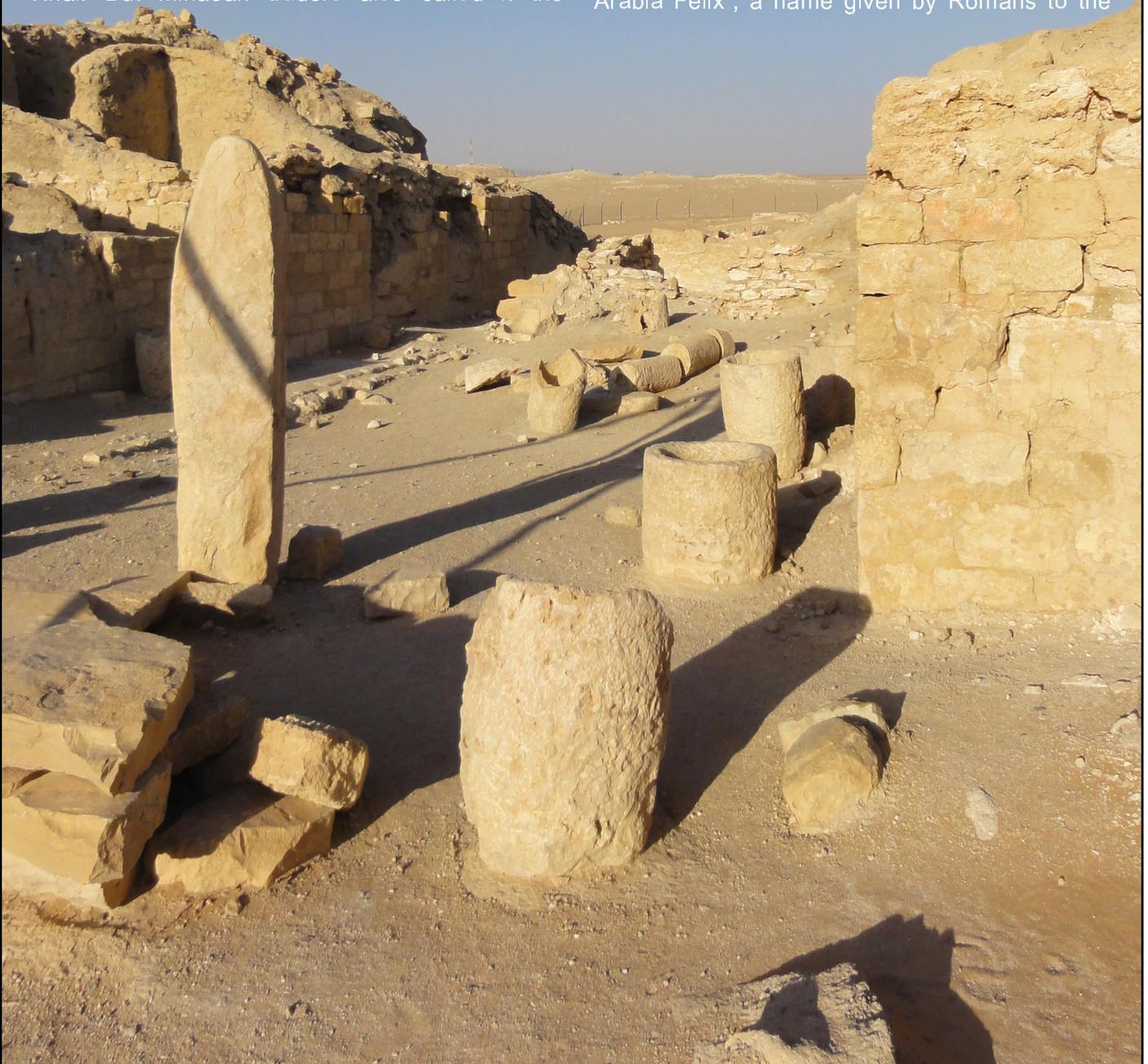
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This ancient oasis and vital trading center is situated about 80 kms south of Wadi al-Dawassar right next to the highway going south to Najran at the foot of the Jebel Tuwaiq escarpment. It was an important staging post on the key south-north caravan route to the Gulf coastal area and Mesopotamia. Certain South Arabian inscriptions called al-Fau also Qaryat dhat Khal, for its principal deity was god Khal. But Minaean traders also called it the

"City of Paradise", because of its oasis character with many date palm groves. Other ancient sources mention it as Qaryat al-Talu or the "Red City", because of the many red clay palaces built at the time in al-Fau.

### Arabia Felix Influence

Culturally al-Fau was more influenced by "Arabia Felix", a name given by Romans to the



southern part of the Arabian Peninsula today's Yemen, where its main trading items including high valued frankincense came from. Therefore it had, like al-Ukhoud in Najran, very close links with the southern Arabian Ma'in kingdom. And the many Minaean traders in al-Fau worshipped also Ma'in deities plus god Kahl and goddess al-Lat.

Al-Fau is one of the very few southern trading centers, which did not use the Sabaic script, as the Minaic script dominated trade activities. Later they even added Qatabanic and Hadramitic as trade language, which is an indication of the changing political and economic environment at the time. This clearly indicates the trade dominance of Minaic traders. But the main period of economic success was during the heights of Nabataean dominance of incense trade starting about 300 BC and lasting for over 400 years.

**Gerrha Settlers from Gulf**

The first settlement at al-Fau started with a first well dug and an open-air massive limestone block altar erected for god Aabit. This was done to the west of the later erected residential zone and close to the well dedicated also to



Fortified market trading stalls with water basins

deities Aabit and Khal. This initial settlement activity was followed by first housing construction and a temple being built for another deity being worshipped in al-Fau called Shams. The first residents possibly came from the Gerrha or al Jarha kingdom on the Gulf coast. Some time later around 250 BC Minaeans from the al-Muleyh tribe settled in al-Fau and erected a sanctuary for their deity god Wadd, which was now the 4th deity worshipped at al-Fau.

**Unique Market Fortress**

Al-Fau is one of the few ancient settlements in the region with only one uninterrupted occupation period, and therefore no multi-layer tell is found here. It is

a rather large city with well preserve ruins, but interestingly no defensive city walls or any citadel type fortress either. Therefore we find in al-Fau a very unique building not found anywhere else on the Arabian Peninsula. This was a highly fortified market with 20 m thick walls. Yes you have read correctly, these walls were in antiquity really that thick, as can be seen partly from the pictures in this article. This thickness was also needed as a sufficient stable base for the enormous heights of that wall.

The fortress market was located northeast of the residential zone on the west bank of the ancient wadi and had a rather unique structure. Measuring 31 x 25 m it was surrounded by this massive enclosure wall guarded by seven towers. The heights reached 10 m and was built of limestone blocks with internal and external mud brick facing. Unique is also that this fortress market had only one single entrance via a very small and low square opening as door, which only one man could enter even needing to bend down to pass. This way the entering people and the exit of goods were well controlled. The market featured a central rectangular



Fortified market with 20 meter thick walls

courtyard with a deep stone lined well and a canal for ablutions, which passed under the massive wall via a refuse pipe. Around the courtyard numerous rather small shops or stores were located in a unique double row layout. Front stores were accessible directly from the

courtyard and back stores via various small passages.

### Peaceful Co-existence

Similar to Dedan representatives of two trading kingdoms and clans lived in one city next to each other in peace over long time and again this involved a strong Minaean community. Silver and bronze coins found were minted depicting Kinda god Khal and were found in great numbers in many houses. This is proof of rich merchant clans dominating the economy and possibly al-Fau politics. But only at al-Fau, Gerrhaean and Nabataean coins were minted together in the same city anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula. This was proof that al-Fau played an important role in Gulf and north Arabian Peninsula trading activities.



Huge city extension with many houses

area with numerous houses. The common smaller houses were built of mud brick on stone foundations. Larger houses were made of stone blocks with a wall thickness of up to two meters able to support a second floor. These houses had wooden door frames and a

### Historic Ups & Downs

During the checkered history of al-Fau various tribes seem to have influenced trade and politics and these included well known clans in Saudi history such as al-Sabi, al-Baai, al-Naten, al-Jabal, al-Maren, Hanak (Hanikain), Ameer (Amirain) and Ghalman tribes. The Hanak clan was also present in Dedan some 1,000 km further north during early Lihyan rule and the al-Sabi tribe allied with Lihyan rulers later. Around 100 AD the second settlement phase started after the Ghalman tribe had invaded and partly destroyed al-Fau. At a later stage al-Fau became dominated by the Kinda and Madhhij tribes.

water supply system for toilets on the upper floor and for household waste outside pits were used. House decorations included decorated walls at first with simple designs incised in mortar.

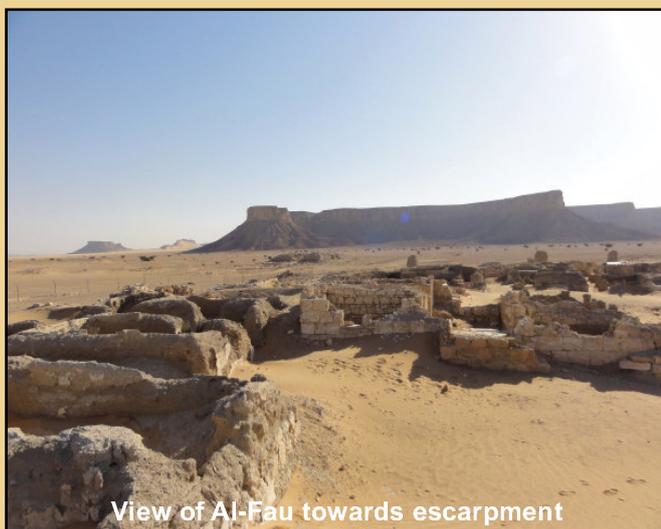
Therefore all house walls made of stone or mud brick were nicely plastered in white. Later artistic developments show scenes of daily life painted in black and red, and thereafter colored frescos with sophisticated scenes became the norm looking rather similar to some Greek examples. This level of decorations and demonstrated luxury was proof for the accumulated wealth of al-Fau traders.

### Sophisticated Decorations

By far the largest area in al-Fau is the huge residential

### Many Gods & Temples

Some temples and the open-air altars were already men-



View of Al-Fau towards escarpment



Enormous residential quarters

tioned. In total there were three temple buildings, two to the west of the market. The oldest was used for worshipping several gods including al-Ahwar. The largest temple was first used for moon god Sin and later for sun god Shams and Athtar. The third temple was erected in the residential zone for Minaean god Wadd and here we also find a reference to Lihyanite god Dhu Ghai-bat. This temple today is the best preserved, and the best indication of the al-Fau specific architectural ancient shrine sanctuary layout.

**Burial Structures & Rituals**

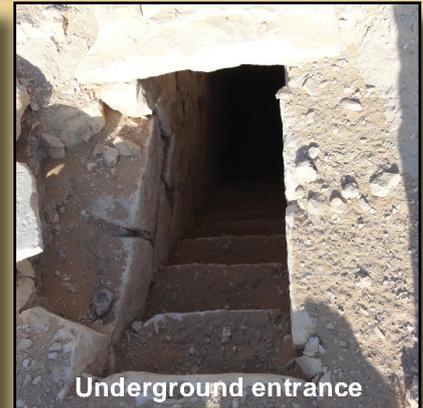
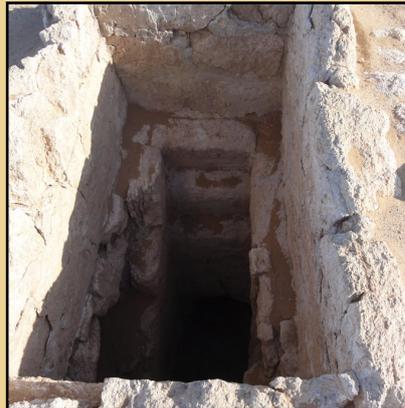
With regards to burials and funerary rituals different types of tombs were used, because different cultural groups lived in al-Fau, either together or over time during the three different settlement phases. Collective family tombs were built by rich merchant clans, with clan names mentioned in the funerary tower or tumuli section: Mu'awiyah, Ijil ibn Hofi'amm and Ma'sad ibn Arsch. These tumuli were erected with mud brick on a square stone foundation over underground tomb chambers or hypogaeum dug out of bed rock with multiple chambers for numerous clan burials. The chambers were accessible via stairs, which were covered and sealed off by heavy stone slabs and only removed when a new family burial took place.

**Deity Rock Art Depiction**

There was also a public cemetery to the northeast of the city with small simple stone covered burial mounds and stone markers. This burial ground was protected by an interesting rock art depiction of heavily armed deity holding two lances and in the other hand a boomerang shaped throwing stick. In addition there is a long dagger or sword attached to his belt and an animal hide shaped shield with markings is shown next to the lances as a type symbol or propriety sign. This scratched image is situated in a very strategic position at the corner of the escarpment high up on a whitish



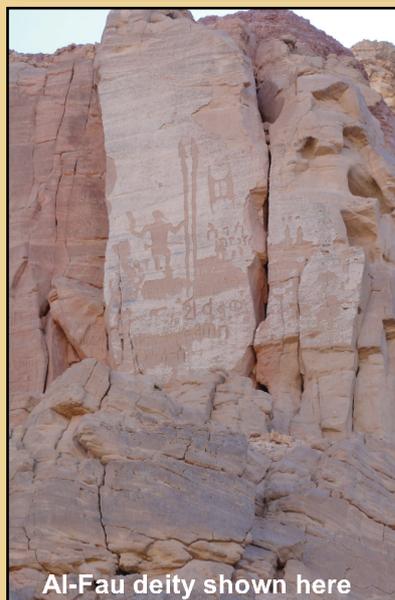
Typical round tumuli with burial chamber underneath



Underground entrance



Typical Al-Fau tumuli with burial chamber underneath



Al-Fau deity shown here



Smaller round tumuli



Vast cairn field south of Al-Fau



Major burial cairn with tail of smaller cairns



Same cairn field seen from above from google



Fortified market & extensive city ruins from google

colored cliff and can be seen from far.

### **Enormous Cairn Fields**

A third type of funerary structures can be found all along the foot of the escarpment to the south of al-Fau. These are hundreds of stone pile cairns as can be seen throughout Saudi Arabia. Here they are big and small in size, some possibly featuring multiple burials. Most cairns in the country are normally found on top of hills and mountain plateaus, few on slopes, like here in al-Fau. An interesting new burial formation can be seen here as well. At first it looks like a so-called needle, but actually it consists of a row of smaller cairns between to big cairns at both ends. Another interesting funerary or ritual structure can be found on top of the al-Fau escarpment. These are needles with small triangular heads sighted in groups of up to ten scattered all over the mountain plateau.

### **High Quality Manufacturing**

The sophistication of an ancient culture or civilization can well be judged by the day-to-day household items and art they produced, no different in al-Fau. Local artisans created statues of high quality made of stone, bronze, clay and depicting gods, humans and animals. Weaving was wide spread and done in many houses using linen, sheep wool and camel hair. Metal items manufactured included vases, human statues, knives, daggers, needles, keys, saddle trees and small kohl spoons or spartulae to apply cosmetics. Jewelry was also handcrafted with rather rare pieces of metal bracelets, silver rings, copper and iron rings. Glass was used for the production of small vases, bottles for perfume and ointments as well as for beads.

### **Extensive Pottery Production**

Pottery production was wide spread and included three types: coarse, fine and enamel ware. These were produced on wheel or by hand. The coarse ware was for daily household use with cooking pots, jars, vases, colanders and lids. Fine ware featured incised decorations. Enamel plates, carafes with vertical lines and plant motifs either in high or low relief were manufactured with yellowish clay and a green and blue glaze. In addition a large number of imported Nabataean red clay potsherds and silver coins of king Malichus I. and Aretas IV. were found at al-Fau giving again proof



Escarpment with many “needles” on top



Escarpment base lined with many burial cairns

of the extensive trading ties.

### Excavated Special Objects

Some special objects found are worth being mentioned here to complete the picture of the high level of al-Fau civilization. Some Hellenistic objects point to extended trade ties including various Greek style frescos, one depicting god Dionysos. A Greek funerary bed with bronze legs in dolphin form is a very rare discovery on the Arabian Peninsula and speaks for the cosmopolitan and wealthy trading clans. Further items supporting an opulent lifestyle are: imported glass ware including a small date shaped bottle with Syrian origin dated to 100 AD, and as further example various small and large Greek style bronze figurines plus a silver strainer and servicing spoon. All proof of an early life in luxury.

### Kinda Kingdom

The Kinda tribe is closely related to al-Fau as later in its history al-Fau even became the capital of the Yemeni Himyar ruler installed Kinda kings. The Kinda or Hujr tribe was part of the Sabaeen kingdom before 300 AD and settled east of its capital Marib. This tribe played a major role in the Sabaeen-

Hadramite war and after the Sabaeen victory parts of the Kinda tribe established themselves in the northern Hadramaut area. At this time the Arabian Peninsula was not ruled by kings, but by tribes and many sheikhs formed various alliances and many changing tribal confederations.

### Tribal Confederations

The most important confederation was the “Ma’add” confederation of sheikhs, which lasted for 150 years between 200 to 350 AD. The first members were the Kinda and Qahtan tribes possible ruling jointly with one sheikh mentioned Rabi’at bin Mu’awiyat from the Thawr lineage, who resided in al-Fau. Thereafter the Kinda tribe is noted as ruling under sheikh Malik. Other tribal members mentioned in this context are the al-Khasasa tribe with sheikh Mar’alqays bin Awf, the Nizar tribe with no

ruler names given, the al-Asd tribe under sheikhs al-Harith bin Ka’b and Malik bin Ka’b. Thereafter followed a period of joint rule of Kinda and Madhhij tribes with sheikhs Malik bin Badda’ (Budd) and Malik bin Mu’awiyat.

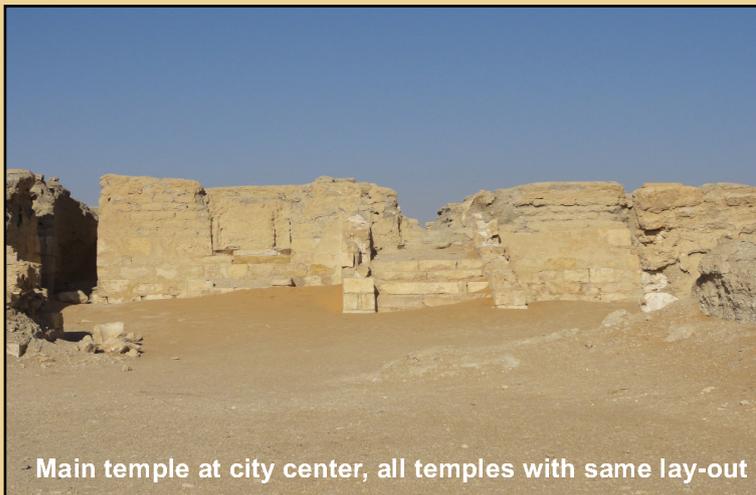
### Kinda - Himyar Relationship

But after 350 AD no vice kings ruled in al-Fau any longer, as the Himyar kings based in Yemen took again full control of al-Fau themselves. The following historic records are very sketchy, but after 425 AD the Kinda tribe was installed again as vassal by Himyar king Hasan ibn Amr ibn Tubba’ to rule the “Ma’add” tribal confederation to control central and northern Arabia after Himyar finally annexed the famous Saba kingdom well known through Queen Sheba. They controlled all central and northern Arabian trade routes from their new capital Qaryat al-Fau. Ghassanids, Lakhmids and Kinda were all vassals appointed by

the different major regional powers like Byzantine in the north, Persia in the east and Himyar in the south to protect their interests against rising Adnani tribes.

### Adnani Threat

Kinda were the most successful in arranging



Main temple at city center, all temples with same lay-out

themselves with Adnani tribes through pacts and focused on the threads posed by northern Lakhmids. They tried to expand to Bahrain, but were thrown back by the Abdul Qais Adnani tribe. Some tribal groups therefore returned to Hadramaut in fourth century AD, others moved to the Jebel Shammar area in the Najd desert as well as to the Levant area. In 525 AD after Ethiopian Aksum conquered Himyar, the Kinda kingdom split into many smaller areas and by 540AD were overtaken by the now powerful

Adnani tribes as well as Lakhmids. The oasis city was finally abandoned when the over 120 wells supporting farming and breeding of cattle, sheep, goat, camel and horses went dry.

### Summery

Al-Fau belongs to the 2nd & 3rd generation of ancient oasis trading centers covering a historic period of nearly 1,000 years starting from 300 BC. In Saudi Arabia only Dedan, Tayma and Adumatu belong to the 1st generation of highly active

trading empires going back another 1,000 years. But al-Fau is unique because of its market fortress with no similar structure found on the Arabian Peninsula. Different to other ruined ancient oasis cities al-Fau is the only one being fully deserted with not a single remaining palm tree. So it is difficult to imagine that this was a thriving agricultural area once upon a time. Only the regular small round circles on the ground seen by the observant visitor are a sign of date palm groves having existed in antiquity.



Central pillared hall in front of fortified market possibly a royal palace

### Travel Tips

Going to al-Fau over the weekend by vehicle is possible, but a long 8 hour drive from Riyadh SCTA visitor permit is needed for al-Fau

Add 1 to 2 more days & visit various Bir Himma petroglyph sites further south, and/or Tathleeth Camping out in the al-Fau area is possible

There are hundreds of cairns in different forms to explore along the foot of the escarpment

Many groups of rare triangular needles can be seen scattered on top of the escarpment

The local al-Fau guard is very friendly, but does not speak any English

About 1 km north is an interesting rock art depicting a warrior or god high up on the corner cliff