

FAILAKA ISLAND - KUWAIT
AN ISLAND OF AL-HIDR, THE GREEN MAN
OR ELIAS, THE SERVANT OF GOD

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Kuwait

“He was also informed of two islands in the sea near the mouth of the Euphrates. The first was not far from its outlets about a hundred and twenty stades from the shore, and the river mouth; this one is smaller, thickly wooded with every kind of tree; it also contained a shrine of Artemis, and the island’s inhabitants spent their lives round the shrine; it pastured wild goats and deer which were consecrated to Artemis and could range free, and no one was allowed to hunt them unless he desired to sacrifice one to the goddess: only on this condition was hunting not forbidden. According to Aristobulus, Alexander commanded this island to be called Icarus, after the island Icarus in the Aegean Sea” (Arrian, *Anabasis* VII. 20.3-5).

Historians long considered that Failaka Island just off mainland Kuwait might be the one referred to in Arrian the Greek writer’s report, but until 1960 there had been no proof that it was. Longtime residents in Kuwait and Britain’s Political Agent Colonel H. R. P. Dickson and his wife Dame Violet first visited Failaka in 1935 and seeing the ground covered in potsherds and other indications of antiquity convinced them that the place must have a very old history. The arrival of Danish archaeologists in 1958 began to reveal the island’s connection to Dilmun¹ and Sumer of Mesopotamia as well as the Icaros mentioned in Arrian’s history of Alexander the Great.

According to Colonel Dickson (1956) Failaka was remarkable for the traces of ruined villages, tombs and shrines; these were dotted all over the island along with potsherds dating from 2500 BC (early Bronze Age) to modern times. Until comparatively recently it was possible to pick up the occasional piece of old Chinese sherd. As these have been found elsewhere down the Gulf this illustrates how popular Chinese ceramics were in the past, as indeed they still are.

A major Shrine was *Maqām al-Hidr* on the north-west side of the island. Sited by the edge of the sea, the *maqām* or Shrine when the Dicksons first saw it (1935) was built from blocks of stone (see photograph No. 1). It stood out prominently from the land and the sea. Nearby spread across the flat ground was an old graveyard, also littered with potsherds from all periods to the broken pieces of the present period. The strange thing about these graves was the distances, about fifteen feet between

¹ Dilmun is usually identified with Bahrain but Failaka might also have been part of the territory of Dilmun. For this, see Potts 1994:35.

each head and footstone. No explanation exists as to why the graves appear to be so long and local lore murmured, "Giants once inhabited the island".

Local tradition also had it that al-Hidr on route to Friday prayers in Mekka, stopped every Thursday night in Failaka, before stepping in one stride to a site opposite the old American Mission Hospital on the Kuwaiti mainland. Barren women, and those without sons thought that, if they were considered worthy and they visited the Shrine, they would become pregnant. Until the late 1960s Failaka was visited by not only women from Kuwait but women as far afield as India, Afghanistan, Iran and elsewhere. Local women also thought the site a good one for picnics and groups of them could often be seen arriving on a weekend.

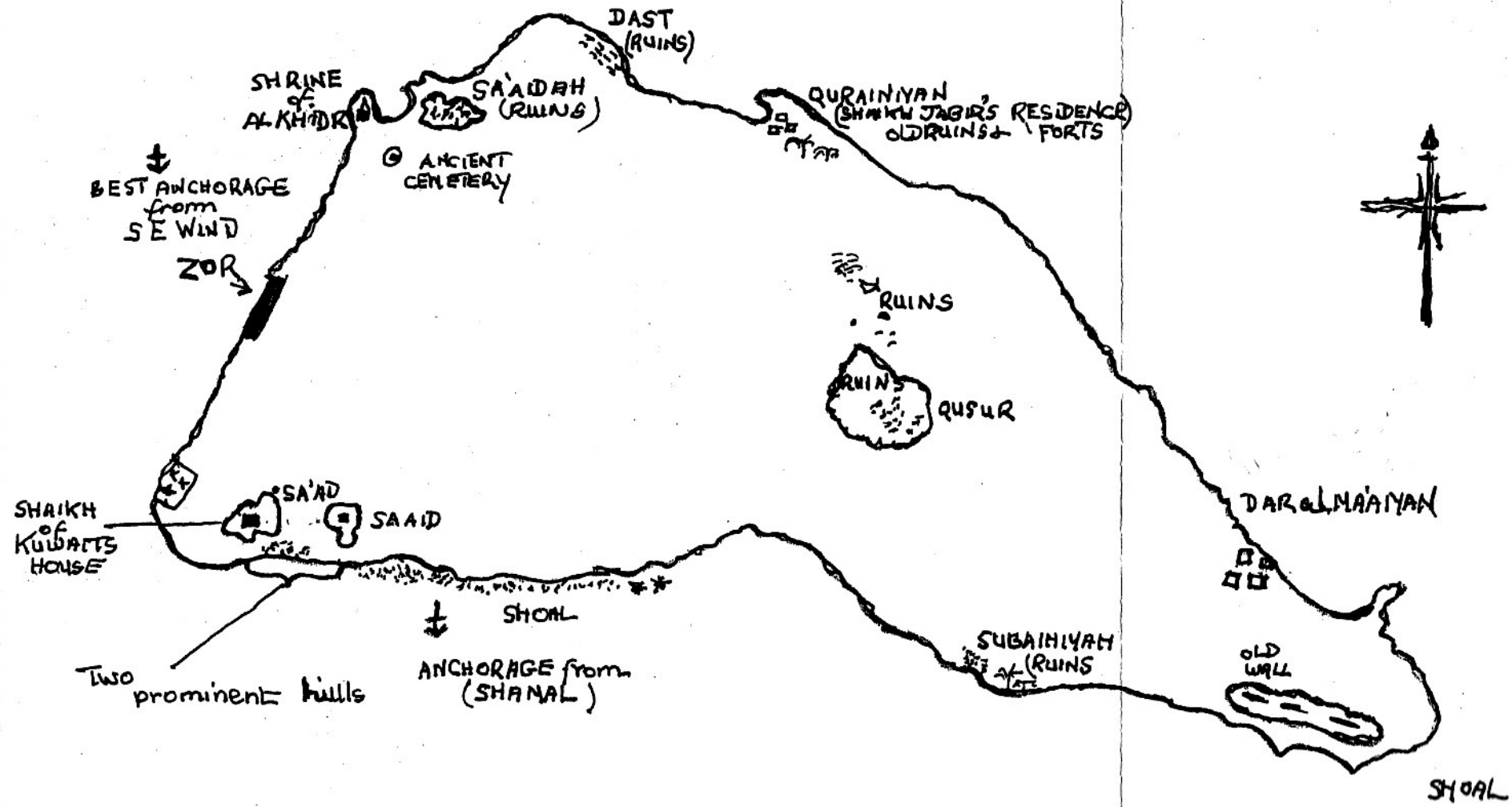
al-Hidr's footprints were reputed to have been imprinted in the mudflats on the seawards side of the *maqām* as well as on the flats opposite the American Mission Hospital on the mainland. Dame Violet Dickson, who knew about these traditions, found sunk in on the seaward side of the Shrine three definite footprints of a camel, three very good ones of men with bare feet, one of a man wearing a sandal, and several children's footprints. She thought that the rocks had been part of a flat muddy foreshore which over the ages hardened to rock so retaining the ancient footprints. In both the mainland and Failaka those rocks have long disappeared, and even in 1960 the author was unable to find any trace of footprints in either place.

al-Hidr is listed in the *Islamic Desk Reference* as "the name of a popular figure, who plays a prominent part in legend and story". The majority of Qur'ān commentators identify him with the servant of God mentioned in Qur'ān 18.1. al-Hidr Shrines are to be found throughout the Middle East, and extend as far as Britain (The Green Man) to India where there is still a *maqām* just outside Delhi².

In the early 1960s the author and her husband Tareq Rajab, Kuwait's first Director of Antiquities & Museums, went to live on Failaka Island for the three months of the excavation season. For the next four years or so this was the normal pattern and during that time it was possible to observe a little of what went on at the al-Hidr Shrine. The excavations of the Greek and Bronze Age sites took place under a Danish team headed by Professor P. V. Glob of Aarhus University in Denmark. He was a tremendous character who had participated in expeditions to Greenland and had also directed most of the expeditions to the sites of the ancient civilizations of the Dilmun culture of which Failaka Island was a part.

The Danes were naturally immediately interested in the Shrine and there seemed to be enough evidence to suggest or speculate that the Shrine might have originally been dedicated to Artemis (or the Babylonian Ishtar). Failaka Island was and has

² The preference to locate a shrine of al-Hidr in the vicinity of the sea is a clear indication of al-Hidr's character as a sea demon. For this and for a general study on the shrines and sanctuaries dedicated to al-Hidr, see Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1960: Index, s.v. "al-Hidr". On the figure of al-Hidr, see also *EI*¹ II, 923-927 and *EI*² IV, 902-905 s.v. "al-Khadir".



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remained a holy place for the past 4,000 years. Every weekend bus loads of black robed women could be seen approaching al-Hidr in buses or walking there from the port.

Those who wished to bear a child would spend Thursday night in prayer at the Shrine and walk round the shrine with the bottom half of her dress tied to that of a woman who had already borne children. According to Kuwaiti orthodox fundamentalist thinking there were dark rumours about "immoral practices", especially as far as could be judged the success rate seemed to be good! The Shrine had a caretaker who was generally a woman and the last one Sa'ada, spoke with belief and happiness of the satisfaction she got from receiving letters of thanks from those who had successfully conceived. The Shrine was one from which people could also make wishes or vows.

Sa'ada, a Kuwaiti negress was an old woman of great character and in 1965 she had made the Pilgrimage to Mekka along with a party which included the author's husband. She had made the pilgrimage many times before and informed everyone that if "God disagreed with her, he was entitled to cancel her previous pilgrimages!" She had a bold tongue and a tendency to use bad language, which called down rebukes from others but all to no avail!

On a first visit to al-Hidr in 1960 the author was accompanied by the wife of a Palestinian colleague at the Kuwait Museum. She was in her late thirties, and had been married at the age of 13 but no children had been forthcoming. At first the couple had been upset and desparate with both sets of in-laws, equally concerned and insistent on medical treatment. Everything known had been undertaken but to no avail.

The caretaker standing outside the Shrine came up and asked if we were married and had children, to which I replied 'Yes' and no further interest was taken. Semira said 'No' and immediately the old lady tried to persuade her that with prayers at the Shrine at the appropriate time she would undoubtedly achieve her wish³. Semira appeared shocked at the whole idea, probably some feelings of modernity were mixed up in her mind, and the author felt rightly or wrongly, that after some 20 years of marriage without issue, she was no longer that interested in having a child. At any rate, she refused even to speak to the caretaker any more and never went near the Shrine again.

Although prayer was a strong, and probably the main component to a visit to the Shrine, it has not yet been possible to find complete details about the whole procedure. Offerings, a plait of hair, on one occasion cuttings of pubic hair, and occa-

³ Visit for the sake of becoming pregnant is a general characteristic of the shrines dedicated to al-Hidr. See Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1960:160, 190, 241, 247, 289.

sional bits of jewellery like a gold ring were left in the interior of the Shrine⁴. The pleasant scent of incense and rose water hung faintly inside the Shrine and henna handprints decorated the walls around the inside.

The steps of the Shrine usually had the blood stains of sheep sacrifices down them and had to be negotiated with some care after Thursday night.

In mainly Sunnī Kuwait such practises were not approved of by the more Fundamentalist sections of the population and the whole thing was probably considered a Šī'a practice. Nevertheless, Sunnī women wishing to conceive or make a vow would go to al-Hidr; certainly they did and still do resort to made-up amulets and other such devices for any problems.

The al-Hidr Shrine (photograph No. 1) constructed from blocks of stones and built most likely by Failachawis, was pulled down by the Government. That photograph had been taken by Dame Violet on her first visit to the Island in 1935. It is said that previous to that one there had been another Shrine which had also been removed, there are however no descriptions or records about it. By the 1950s, maybe earlier, the Shrine had been rebuilt and was once more thriving. Around the early to mid 1970s it was again removed, an action which coincided with the rise of the Wahnābism⁵. This caused much resentment in Kuwait's Šī'i community, as will be seen.

Since the Invasion and occupation in 1990 even the "Giants" graves have disappeared and on a recent and brief visit to the Island it was difficult to find the place where the Shrine had been. Interestingly in the 1970s around the time the last Shrine was dismantled, a rumour had gone around that the Government intended to build a small maternity hospital over the site.

In March 1991 the author had the opportunity to fly to Failaka Island for a few hours. On that trip there was a Kuwaiti museum person who had been invited to investigate what had happened to the various archaeological sites during the occupation. The subject of al-Hidr's Shrine came up, and when it was mentioned his whole face changed, went red with anger and through his teeth he almost shouted how upsetting it was that the Shrine had been broken up by the Government. He was of Šī'i persuasion and the whole incident gave an indication of the resentment caused and showed the Shrine had not been forgotten.

A few years ago during Muḥarram the Šī'i mosques as always were full. More amazing was the fact that outside them, particularly in the wide open sea front area down in the centre of town, near the main Šī'i mosques were literally thousands of

⁴ For hair as a votive offering in a shrine connected to al-Hidr, see Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1960:289.

⁵ Kuwaiti Sunnī thinking is always of the Wahnābī brand, and even a talk given in Kuwait in 1996 by a very eminent German scholar on "Aspects of Šūfism" brought disapproving looks and comments from the audience. However, the fact that the professor gave the talk at all is interesting.

cars and people, many including children dressed in black. It was all perfectly orderly, with people and their families quietly picnicking, those near the mosques listening to the tale of the murder of 'Alī, and there they stayed most of the night. The author had never before seen in Kuwait so many people out in public for Muḥarram, and this year she has been invited to attend some of the prayer and story sessions.

It would seem certain that the story of al-Hidr on Failaka Island has not been forgotten or 'lost', and it is with some expectancy that one waits for the next chapter in the story of al-Hidr on Failaka Island.

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Photograph No. 1

