

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM

THREE

Edited by

Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe,
John Nawas, and Everett Rowson

With

Roger ALLEN, Edith AMBROS, Thomas BAUER, Johann BÜSSOW,
Ruth DAVIS, Ahmed EL SHAMSY, Maribel FIERRO, Najam HAIDER, Konrad
HIRSCHLER, Nico KAPTEIN, Alexander KNYSH, Corinne LEFÈVRE, Scott
LEVI, Roman LOIMEIER, Daniela MENEGHINI, Negin NABAVI,
M'hamed OUALDI, D. Fairchild RUGGLES, Ignacio SÁNCHEZ, and
Ayman SHIHADDEH



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Maldives

The **Maldives** is a central Indian Ocean archipelago of coral atolls that was Islamised in the mid-sixth/twelfth century. Early sources describe abrupt political and economic transformations as institutional Buddhism was abolished and mosques built on royal endowments across several islands during the sixth/twelfth century. Over the centuries that followed, integration into trans-regional Muslim circulations of commerce and culture facilitated the consolidation of a strong sense of Islamic identity amongst the population. Today, citizenship in the modern Republic of the Maldives is constitutionally limited to Muslims.

1. EARLY HISTORY

The archipelago comprises approximately 1,192 islands, of which fewer than two hundred are currently inhabited. The earliest history of human migration to these islands remains unclear, but carbon dates from a few archaeological sites around the country have yielded dates establishing settlements from at least the mid-third century CE, although some islands may have been populated considerably earlier. Archaeological work in the country has discovered and documented the material signature of a significant period of Buddhism in the islands' earlier history, with the construction of artificial mounds at temple and monastery sites on several islands from at least the mid-fourth century CE.

2. THE DHIVEHI LANGUAGE

Dhivehi, the language of the islands' inhabitants, forms (together with Sinhala) the Insular Indo-Aryan subgroup of Indo-European languages and has historically

been written in various scripts based on Indic (Eveyla, Dhives Akuru) and Arabic-influenced (Hedi Akuru, Affandi) models. Contemporary Dhivehi is written in Thaana, a unique script written from right to left, with nine base symbols for consonants derived from Arabic numeral words and others derived from modified forms of some Arabic letters (*thiki jehey thaana*), as well as from earlier local adaptations of an Indic numeral system. Vowels are indicated by marks (*fili*) based upon and expanding the Arabic model of *ḥarakāt* (short vowel marks). Dhivehi manuscript traditions include religious endowment grants, devotional texts, royal genealogies, poetry, correspondence, and legal documents.

3. ADVENT OF ISLAM AND THE ISLAMISATION OF THE ISLANDS

The islands were already visible on the horizon of an expanding Muslim world by the third/ninth century and are described in some of the best-known early geographical works in Arabic. *Akhbār al-Ṣīn wa-l-Hind* ("An account of China and India"), a composite fourth/tenth-century text, places the islands within the orbit of Sarandīb (Sri Lanka), the chief island of al-Dībājāt (which may also include the Laccadives), but with their own female ruler. By the mid-fourth/tenth century, the Arab historian, geographer, and traveller al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) noted that merchants from Siraf and Oman were active in the Maldives. The primary trade goods they sought there were ambergris, cowrie shells, and the coir rope used for rigging and for the stitching of sewn-hull vessels. In later centuries an extensive trade developed in dried fish, which was shipped as far as Aceh (in northern Sumatra) and China [Illustration 1].

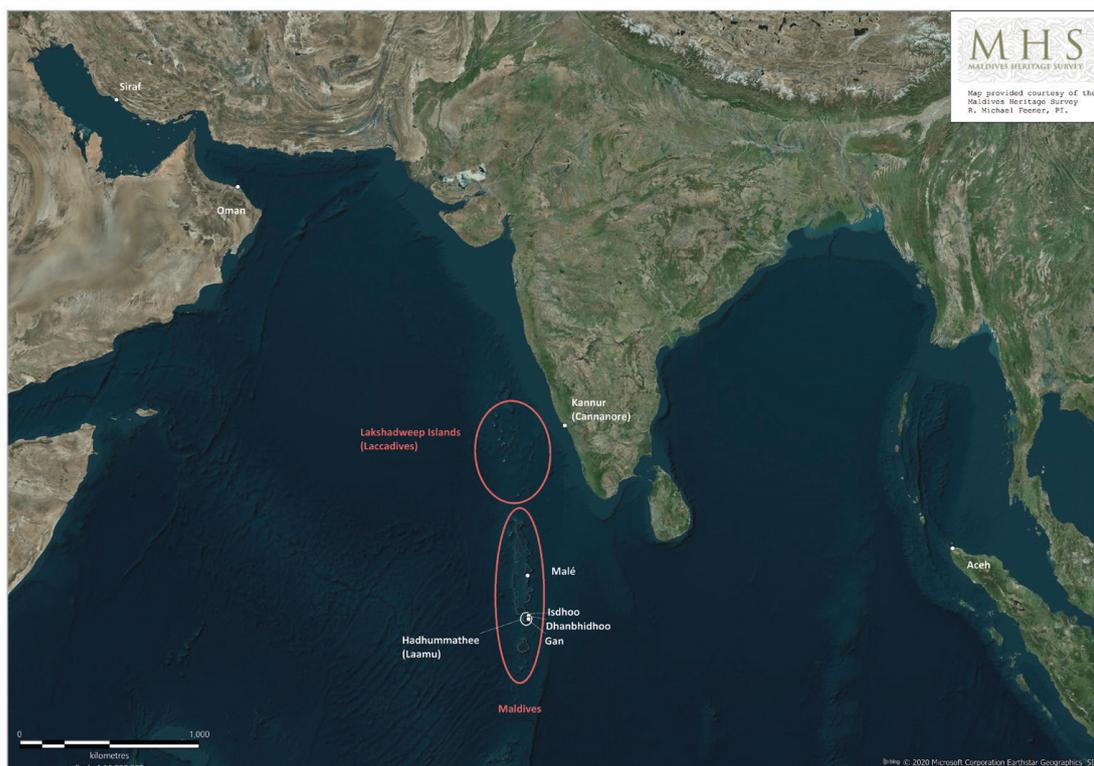


Illustration 1. Map of the Maldives. Map courtesy of the Maldives Heritage Survey, R. Michael Feener.

Increased integration into the expanding maritime Muslim trading networks after the turn of the second millennium CE facilitated the conversion of the islands to Islam. As recounted in the earliest sources extant, the Islamisation of the Maldives was not only early compared to that of other places along the Indian Ocean littoral but also strikingly abrupt. Three Dhivehi-language copper-plate inscriptions (*loamafaanu*) from Hadhumathee (Laamu) atoll detail the new governmental and economic order ushered in with the conversion of the islands to Islam. Copper plates from Isdhoo and Gan date the Islamisation of islands in Laamu atoll under King Gadanaadheethiya to 582 years after Sri Mahammadu Petāmarun (the Prophet) “attained Heaven.” The

phrasing of these texts implies that the count of years was, in this case, from the death of the Prophet, which, working from the traditional dating of 12 Rabiʿ al-Awwal 11, would be 1197–8 CE. In the following year, the *loamafaanu* from the nearby island of Dhanbidhoo informs us that the king continued the campaign of Islamisation on that island in the same way he had done in Isdhoo and Gan: abolishing the institutions of the Buddhist *saṅgha* (clergy), demolishing monasteries, destroying religious images, confiscating their lands, and reallocating their endowed sources of revenue to support newly constructed mosques.

The dates of this project of Islamisation in Hadhumathee (Laamu) presented in the three copper plate inscriptions from

that atoll—which comprise the earliest and most complete texts we have for the period—are nearly half a century later than 548/1153, the date that has become widely established in both international scholarship and Maldivian national consciousness for the initial Islamisation of the country. This is based upon an eighth/fourteenth-century Arabic inscription on wood that previously hung in the Friday congregational mosque (Hukuru Miskiyy) in Malé. This is probably the inscription that the Maghribī traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1369) describes reading there during his extended stays in the 740s/1340s, where he secured an appointment as *qāḍī* and claims to have promoted more extensive observance of the *sharīʿa* in the country. In the early ninth/fifteenth century, the Ming chronicler Ma Huan remarked on the pure and excellent customs and the adherence to religious law by the then entirely Muslim population of the islands.

4. EUROPEAN INTERVENTIONS

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean at the beginning of the tenth/sixteenth century, the Maldives became a new site of contestation in broader struggles for economic and political dominance in the region, involving the interventions of the ʿAlī Rājās of Cannanore (Kannur), on the Malabar coast of India (r. 952–99/1545–91) into Maldivian succession disputes and the reconfiguration of trade routes through the Maldives from ports along the west coast of India and as far afield as the Straits of Melaka. The Portuguese seized Malé in 965/1558 but were expelled fifteen years later by a campaign led by Boḍu Muḥammad Takurufānu of Utheemu (d. 993/1585), who was later elected sultan and introduced administrative and military reforms

in the sultanate. After the Portuguese interlude, European imperial interventions were limited in the Maldives. The islands were claimed as a protectorate by the Dutch in the eleventh/seventeenth century and by the British at the end of the twelfth/eighteenth, but in both cases the islands were seen largely as distant extensions of their colonies in Ceylon. Neither power established any substantial institutions of colonial governance in Malé, but in 1887 the sultan signed a treaty with the British that ceded authority over foreign affairs to the governor in Ceylon.

5. ŠŪFISM AND SHĀFIʿĪ

JURISPRUDENCE

Through the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries, Islam in the Maldives was part of the broader world of Šūfism and Shāfiʿī jurisprudence that linked the shores of the Indian Ocean world from the Swahili Coast of Africa to the Spice Islands of eastern Indonesia. This was dramatically demonstrated in the career of the Qādirī *shaykh* Sayyid Muḥammad Shams al-Dīn from Hamah, in Syria, who arrived in the Maldives by way of Aceh in 1097/1686 and advocated a reform of the observance of *sharīʿa* before having to retreat to exile in India the following year (the Qādirīyya has historically been one of the most widespread Šūfī orders in the Indian Ocean world and claims a lineage stretching back to sixth/twelfth-century Baghdad in its eponymous master, ʿAbd al-Qādir Jilānī, d. 561/1166). He was, however, to return to the Maldives in 1103/1692, whereupon he had himself proclaimed sultan, ruling only a few months before his death later the same year.

Shams al-Dīn was granted the great honour of being interred in the Medhu

Ziyaaraiy (Central Shrine) just opposite the Friday Mosque in Malé. There he rests alongside the sixth/twelfth-century saint credited with the Islamisation of the islands, identified by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa as Abū l-Barakāt al-Barbarī but, in both a later inscription and a royal chronicle from the Maldives, as Yūsuf Shams al-Dīn al-Tabrīzī. Lively traditions of ritual observance at such shrines were a definitive feature of religious life across the islands for centuries. While the ruins of many of these structures can be seen to this day, such practices have been rapidly abandoned over recent decades. This reflects a significant shift in understandings of Islam in the Maldives that began in the 1980s, progressing to a point at which it is today almost unimaginable for most Maldivians to attend festivities or perform any religious rites in the proximity of a tomb shrine.

The only significant exception to this Sunnī Shafiī hegemony in the Maldives recorded in the islands comes in the form of a diasporic community of Ismāīlī Bohras, who came to dominate trade in rice and other goods in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Maldivian Nationalist reactions in the 1930s, however, led first to new restrictions on their commercial dominance, and then to their expulsion.

6. INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The sultanate, which was established in 535/1141 and claimed sovereignty over all of the country's atolls for over eight centuries, persisted through six dynasties until it was finally dissolved in 1968 with the establishment of the Republic of the Maldives. From 1978 to 2008, the country was ruled by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom

(b. 1937), a graduate of al-Azhar (in Cairo) who opened the country to modern international Islamic organisations, which eventually channelled into the Maldives influences from Islamic reform movements in Pakistan, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. Towards the end of his three decades in power, however, Islamists constituted a significant part of the opposition to his authority, and, over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, various movements for *da'wa* and Salafī religious reform have extended a thorough recasting of dominant models of Islamic thought and practice in the country. Most traces of “popular Islam” have now disappeared from the islands of the archipelago.

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R. MICHAEL FEENER

al-Malik al-ʿĀdil I

Al-Malik al-ʿĀdil I, Sayf al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ayyūb (r. 596–615/1200–18), sultan of Egypt, Syria-Palestine, and Upper Mesopotamia, belonged to the Ayyūbid dynasty founded by his older brother Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin, r. 569–89/1174–93). He was born in Baʿlabakk

between 538/1144 and 540/1145 at a time when his father, Ayyūb, governed that city on behalf of the *amīr* of Aleppo, Zangī I (r. 522–41/1128–46). Like his father and brothers, he first entered the service of Zangī’s son Nūr al-Dīn (r. 541–69/1146–74), and he then played a leading role under the rule of Saladin, whose full confidence he enjoyed. In 570/1174 he was appointed governor (*nāʾib*) of Egypt and charged, among other things, with quelling the pro-Fāṭimid revolts in Upper Egypt. Considered then his brother’s presumptive heir, his name was pronounced in the *khuṭba* in Cairo following those of the caliph of Baghdad and Saladin’s, and official documents were issued in his name, such as those granted to Saint Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai. In 577/1182, the promises of marriage of four of his daughters to four of Saladin’s sons and of his eldest son, al-Kāmil, to Saladin’s daughter, all bear witness to a desire to maintain these two branches of the family united. Saladin could hardly do without the military and financial aid from his brother, whom he gave Aleppo in 579/1183, at his request, in exchange for Cairo.

Three years later, when reorganising his territories, Saladin appointed al-ʿĀdil regent to al-ʿAzīz (r. 589–95/1193–8) in Egypt. During the military expeditions against the Franks of Syria-Palestine in 583–4/1187–8, al-ʿĀdil regularly sent reinforcements from Egypt and several times personally participated in the battles. In return, Saladin granted him the fortresses of Kerak and Shawbak in the Transjordan, as well as al-Ṣalt and the entire al-Balqāʾ region, thus gaining control over the important caravan route leading from Syria to Egypt and Arabia. In 587/1191, he participated in the siege of Acre and