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The Eighteenth Regular Report



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Cultural Heritage Protection Cooperation Office, Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU)

ACCU Nara International Correspondent

The ACCU correspondents periodically send reports on cultural heritage protection activities in which they have been recently involved. This is a collection of ten reports submitted by international correspondents in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Eighteenth Regular Report

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Second Season of Excavation in the Maldives for the 'Cowrie Shells: An Early Global Commodity' Project, 2017

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The second season of excavation for the project 'Cowrie shells: an early global commodity' was carried out earlier this year in the Maldives. As mentioned in my report last year (which summarised the excavations carried out at the beginning of last year, 2016), Prof. Anne Haour from the University of East Anglia received a grant from the Leverhulme Trust to conduct research in the Maldives as part of a research project investigating the timescale and nature of the importation of cowrie shells into West Africa between 1150 and 1900 AD.

Thus, this paper will briefly report on the archaeological fieldwork undertaken in early 2017 in the Maldives which involved the continuation of the excavation of one of the five trenches (trench 3, which was located within a vegetated area marked as a tourism zone on the north western side) on the island of Utheemu in Haa Alif Atoll, as well as the large-scale excavation of seven units on the island of Kinolhas in Raa Atoll. In addition, archaeological surveys were also conducted in Kinolhas to record and document any architectural features visible within and around the site. The field team consisted of the Principal Investigator Prof. Anne Haour, Post-Doctoral Researcher Dr. Annalisa Christie, Field archaeologist David Vigouroux, and the author as the PhD candidate for the project. The aim of the research was to identify sites likely to date to the medieval Islamic period.

Work was first started at Utheemu at trench 3, which was left tarpaulined and backfilled last year until the team could come back and investigate the coral stone blocks

that had been discovered. This 2 x 1.5 m trench was extended, resulting in a 5.5 x 3.5 m trench in order to identify the associated material culture and for better understanding of the nature of the coral stone blocks. The 5-day excavation at this trench resulted in the full exposure of one of the coral stone blocks that was half exposed before as well as other similar coral stones. Thus, although it was not possible to identify the nature and function of the slabs, some progress was made in identifying other coral stone blocks within this trench and the material associated with them, which included a lot of pottery and some faunal remains.

The following four weeks of this season were spent on Kinolhas as this is historically a very important island with reports of a medieval harbour, and one of its claims to fame being that Ibn Battuta first landed here during both his visits to the Maldives. The archaeology of the island includes mosques as well as a shrine of a king who used to rule across the Maldives. In addition, the shrine vicinity also had two white marble gravestones—the inscribed stone of one is now housed at the National Museum in Male while the other stone is still left where it was found within the shrine area. These stones are said to have come from Gujrat in India (Ludvik and Claude 2005).

The island of Kinolhas is about 0.5 km² in size and roughly a third of the island is covered in dense vegetation. The medieval settlement was said to be located at the western end of the island, which was largely occupied by vegetable fields and forest. Thus, an area of roughly 180 x 160 m was



Fig 1: Trench at Ha. Utheemu (Haour 2017)



Fig 2: Map of R. Kinolhas (Google Images)

sampled at the western end by digging shovel test pits every 20 m with some amount of clearing through the forest in order to be able to excavate and move around. A total of 45 test pits were dug within this area and the finds were compared with each other to determine where to conduct large scale excavations. Finds included pottery, and faunal and stone remains. After focussing on the particular concentration of materials, seven of these test pits were selected for large scale excavations, which were trenches 325, 321, 449, 544, 631, 443 and 360.

Four of these trenches were extended to 2 x 2 m units (325, 321, 449 and 544) while two were extended to 1 x 2 m units (360 and 443). One of the most outstanding of the seven was trench 631, which was extended to a 6 x 4.5 m unit. This trench recovered a rectangular sandstone structure in the south west corner of the unit of the trench, adjacent to a large mound of coral and stone rubble spread over the northern part of the trench. The coral stones were

subsequently found to be tombstones in varying degrees of fragmentation. The remaining sandstone rubble was provisionally interpreted as having come from the destruction of the associated rectangular structure. The coral stones in the rubble represented the remains of at least six tombstones. Moreover, a dispersal of many large fragments of Chinese porcelain (mostly fragments of bowls) was recovered and associated with the coral and stone rubble mound.

Finds from the trenches include a lot of pottery including a great deal of broken coarse ware, Chinese porcelain and Islamic pottery as well as a miniature pot from trench 449, an intact coarse ware jar from a shovel test pit, faunal remains (including many cowries, various kinds of fish species, chicken and other mammals), metal fragments, glass items (including broken bracelets), a yellow pendant, beads, charcoal and stones foreign to the Maldives.

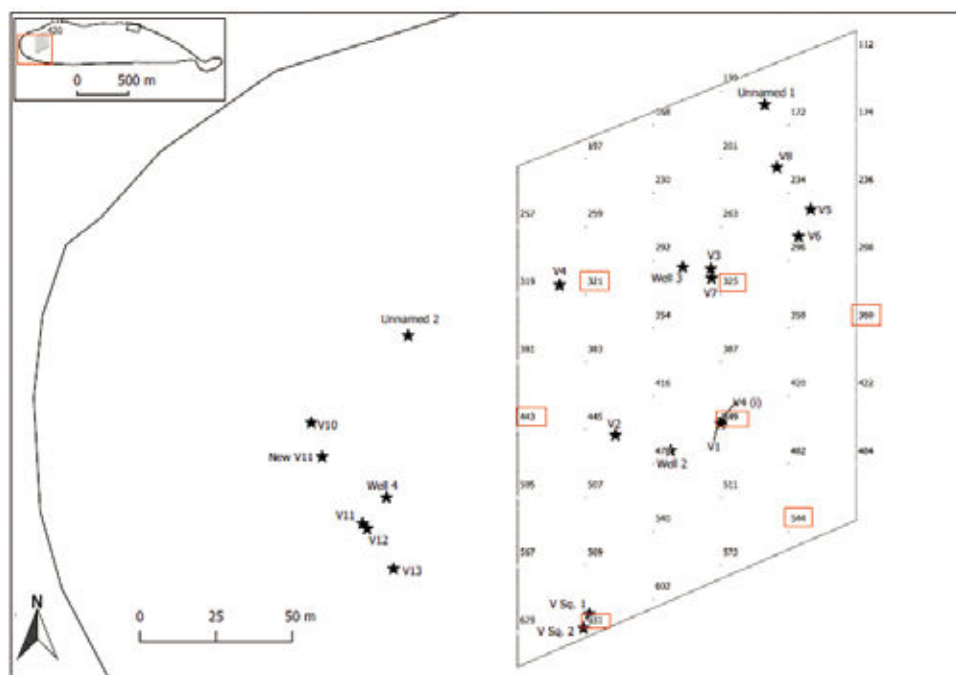


Fig 3: Plan drawing of all the test pits indicated by the three digit numbers, large scale excavated units indicated with the red squares, and stone features recorded during the survey indicated by the stars (Christie 2017)



Fig 4: Drone image of the sampled area showing the vegetation and clearing that was done (Image taken by a local drone owner)



Fig 5: Trench 443 (Christie 2017)



Fig 6: Trench 631 showing funerary features (Christie 2017)



Fig 7: Pottery from the excavations (Vigouroux 2017)



Fig 8: Processing bones (Haour 2017)



Fig 9: Miniature pot with associated cowrie shells from trench 449 (Vigouroux 2017)



Fig 10: Gravestone from trench 631 (Vigouroux 2017)



Fig 11: Recording a squared well (Haour 2017)

Moreover, due to the presence of many quadrilined features within and around the study area, an area of roughly 50 x 100 m was surveyed to document and map any stone features including measurements, photographs and GPS points for each feature. This resulted in the recovery of about 21 features (both coral and sandstone) including a probable bathing tank as well as remains of wells, tombstones, walls and other domestic features.

After four weeks of excavations, surveys and finds analysis, the team has now completed the excavations for the project and returned to England, and are now in the process of analysing the finds and preparing for further publication.

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