

Archaeological Excavations of a Monastery at Kaashidhoo.

Cowrie shells and their Buddhist context in the Maldives.

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Male 2000



Fig.1. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom visiting the archaeological site at Kaashidhoo 23rd February 1998. Guides are professors Egil Mikkelsen and Solbritt Benneth.

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NATIONAL CENTRE FOR LINGUISTIC
AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

MALE'
REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

FOREWORD

Archaeological evidence proves that Maldives has been populated for more than two millennia. The ancient people who lived here, built large monuments; monasteries, temples and dagobas, which were eventually destroyed in later centuries. The remains of these monuments are in the form of mounds, and these can be seen in many islands of the Maldives.

The first reference to archaeological remains in Maldives was made by Lieutenants Young and Christopher in 1834-35. In 1879, Mr. H. C. P. Bell made his first visit to Maldives and suggested that an archaeological survey would help establish that Buddhist missionaries had brought their doctrine to the Maldives. In his later visits, in 1920 and 1922, Mr. Bell carried out some excavations, which established conclusively that there were many Buddhist archaeological sites in the Maldives, dating back to pre-Islamic times.

Subsequently, excavations at Fuah Mulaku (Gnaviyani Atoll), Thoddoo and Ariadhoo (Alifu Atoll), and Kinbidhoo (Thaa Atoll) were undertaken by Maldivians. These excavations were not scientifically conducted and extensive damage was caused to the sites by these amateur excavations.

In order to improve research into the language and history of Maldives, the National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research was formed on 10th November 1982, by His Excellency President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. This created an improved environment for undertaking systematic investigation into Maldivian history, including collaboration with foreign institutions. The NCLHR was made up of a group of well-known Maldivian historians and academics. From its beginnings until the present time, the Centre has had the keen interest and unfailing support and guidance of His Excellency President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,. This has been a major source of inspiration in our work and we take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude.

In 1983-84, the Maldivian government, in collaboration with the Kon-Tiki Museum of Oslo, undertook some excavations on Nilandhoo (Faafu Atoll). The same expedition visited some other sites in Alifu Atoll, Dhaalu Atoll, Laamu Atoll, Gaafu Alifu and Gaafu Dhaalu Atolls and Gnaviyani Atoll.

The first scientific excavation conducted in Maldives were carried out by Professor Egil Mikkelsen and his team in collaboration with the National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research, over a period of three years, from 1996-1998. The site was a mound in Kaashidhoo Island (Kaafu Atoll) called Kaashidhoo Kuruhinna Tharaagandu. This excavation yielded much information about Maldives' ancient past and gives us reason to believe that there is still much more in many archaeological sites in the country.

We are deeply indebted to Professor Mikkelsen and Ms. Solbrit Benneth for the painstaking and difficult work they carried out, both at the Kaashidhoo Kuruhinna Tharaagandu site and during their research on the findings.

This report and the findings included in the report will be of great interest to students of Maldives' history. This work has opened a few pages from the closed book, which has long been the pre-Islamic history of the Maldives. Much of this history is still to be uncovered, hidden in the mounds and ancient sites spread across so many islands of this archipelago.

Abbas Ibrahim
Chairman,
National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research
Male', Republic of Maldives.
30th June 2001

Preface

The excavations at Kaashidhoo which took place from the 22nd of February to the 7th of March 1996, were continued in 1997, from the 3rd to 20th of March and were finished 24th February to 12th March 1998.

This was a co-operation project between the author as project leader and the National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research in Male, Republic of Maldives. Museum director and archaeologist Solbritt Benneth, The Museum of Medieval Stockholm took part in all three excavation campaigns, being responsible for all drawing documentation.

From the National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research Farhath Ali Mohamed took part in the excavations of all three years, Mohamed Waheed in 1996 and Mohamed Thoriq in 1998. In 1997 Lise and Henry Tschudi, Oslo, joined the excavations at Kaashidhoo.

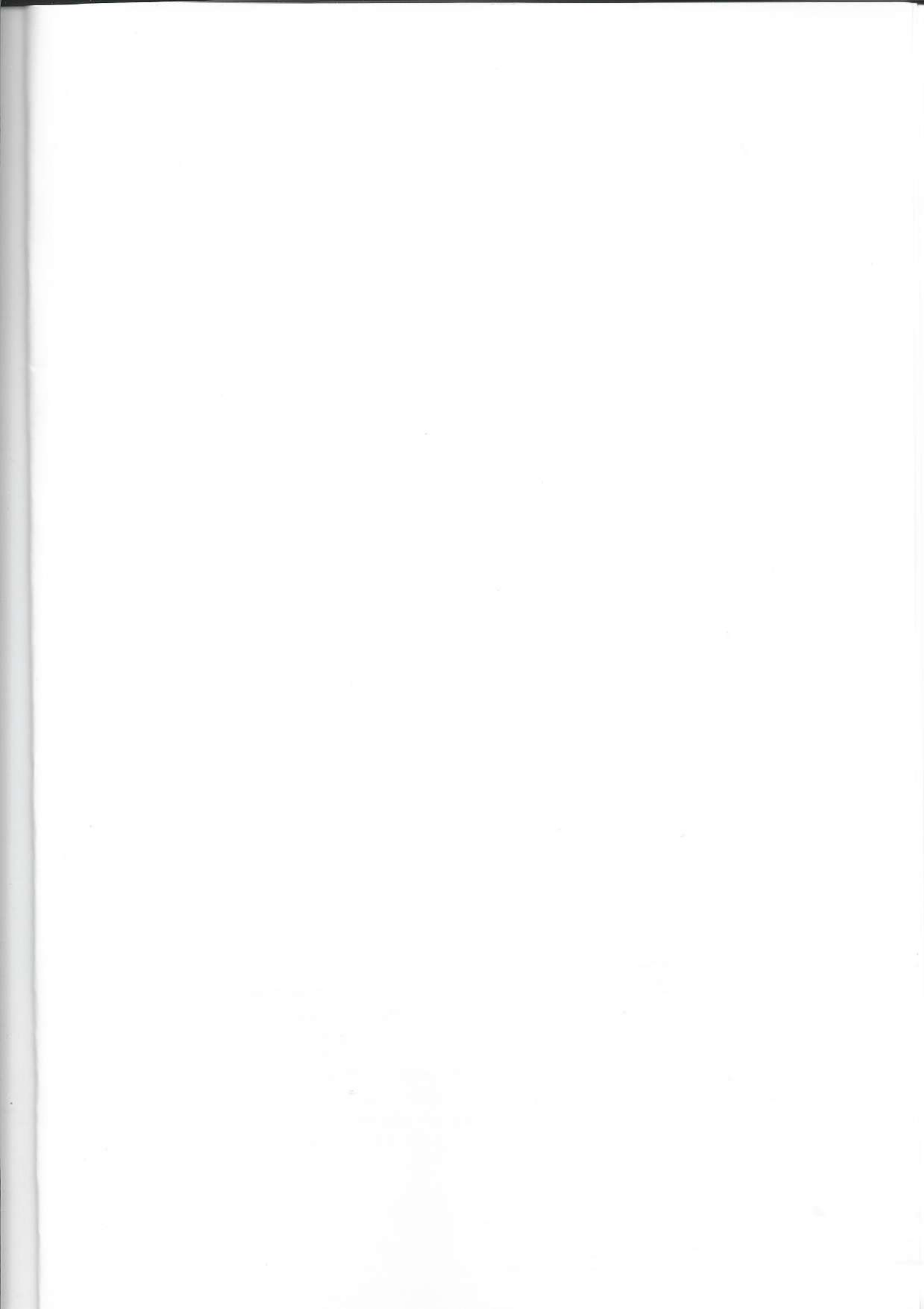
Local workers from Kaashidhoo were carrying out the excavation work at the site at Kuruhinna Tharaa Gandu; 12 workers in 1996, 19 in 1997 and 17-21 men in 1998; in addition to a local foreman.

On the 15th of March 1997 the Chairman of the Centre, Mr. Abbas Ibrahim and his staff visited the archaeological site at Kaashidhoo. The site was visited in 1998 by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (23rd February), First Lady Madam Nasreena Ibrahim (27th February), his daughter Yumna Maumoon (23rd February) and Chairman of the National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research, Mr. Abbas Ibrahim (23rd February and 7th March).

The investigations were made possible by financial support from the University of Oslo, The Kon-Tiki Museum, the Nansen Foundation, the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture and Mrs. Lise Tschudi, Oslo.

My thanks go to all mentioned here, who made the visits and work in the Maldives possible. Thanks also to the inhabitants of Kaashidhoo, the crew on our boats and all who made our visits so pleasant and friendly.

Egil Mikkelsen
Oslo, June 4th 2000



Maldives archaeology

Present knowledge of the early history of the Maldives shows clearly that a Buddhist culture, which created large monuments in the form of monasteries and temples built of stone, was established on the islands no later than the first half of the first millennium AD. This culture was taken over by the Muslims in the latter half of the 12th century.

The first archaeological research on the islands was carried out by H.C.P. Bell in 1920 and 1922 (Bell 1940), and was later followed by the Kon-Tiki Museum expedition led by Thor Heyerdahl in 1983-84 (Skjølsvold 1991; Mikkelsen 1991). Some excavations have also been carried out by Maldivians (Maniku 1993). Bell concentrated on measuring and drawing the monuments, whereas the Kon-Tiki Museum expedition was primarily interested in finding large monuments, stone sculptures and traces of early settlement. The National Museum of the Maldives, in the capital, Male', has a collection of artefacts and stone sculptures of Buddhist origin collected over the years on different islands of the republic. The present author intends to publish these objects in the future.

Buddhism and the spread of cowrie shells

I have in recent years been working on a research project dealing with connections between Southern and Central Asia and Northern Europe during the period AD 500-1000. The spread of cowrie shells to Europe during this period was an important guide in this respect. Cowrie shells, the so-called "money cowrie" (*Cyprea moneta*), are found in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, with the Maldives as the most important source (Burgess 1970). Such shells have been found in four 7th century AD graves in Northern Norway, north of the Arctic Circle (Fig.2) (Vinsrygg 1979). They are also known in Central Europe (Arends 1978) and around the Baltic (Michelbertas 1989; Mugurevics 1962, 1965; Kivikoski 1967; Jansson 1988; Trotzig 1988). I have been engaged on tracing the cowrie shells in archaeological contexts through the former Soviet Union, up to Scandinavia. This stream of cowrie shells within Europe appears to start around AD 500 (Arends 1978).



Fig.2. 7th century grave find with cowrie shells, from Ytterstand, Lodingen, Nordland, Northern Norway (Ts. 940-949). Photo: Eirik I. Johnsen, Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.

What sort of connections were there between Northern Europe and the Indian Ocean in the 6th and 7th centuries AD? One find from Central Sweden may provide a solution to this problem: at the important island of Helgö, a small Buddha statue from Kashmir has been found (Fig.3a); this comes from Kashmir and dates from the 6th century (Ahrens 1964, Jansson 1988). This clearly points to Buddhist culture. Did it come to Scandinavia along the same routes as the cowrie shells? Was it simply an object, or did any religious ideas accompany the statue? These are among many questions which must be asked and discussed, but which can hardly be finally solved during my research project.

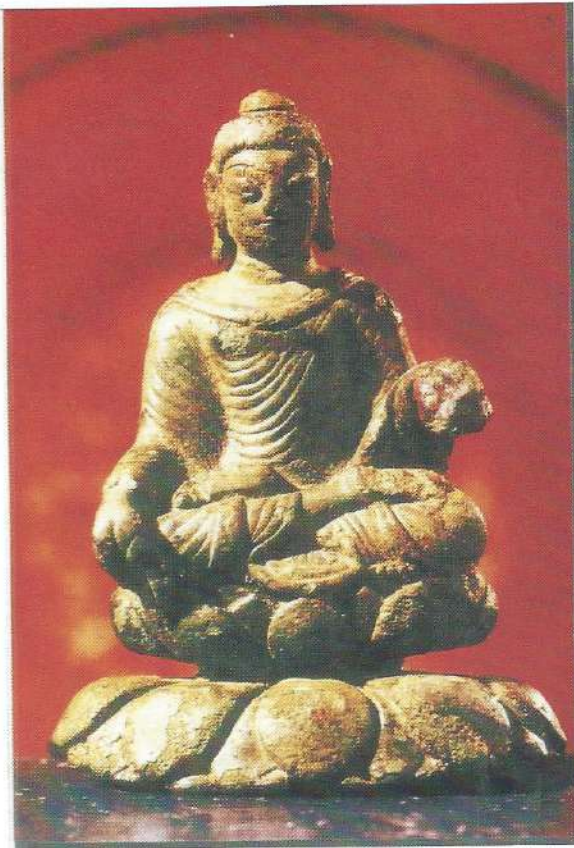


Fig. 3 a. *Bronze Buddha from Helgö, Sweden.*

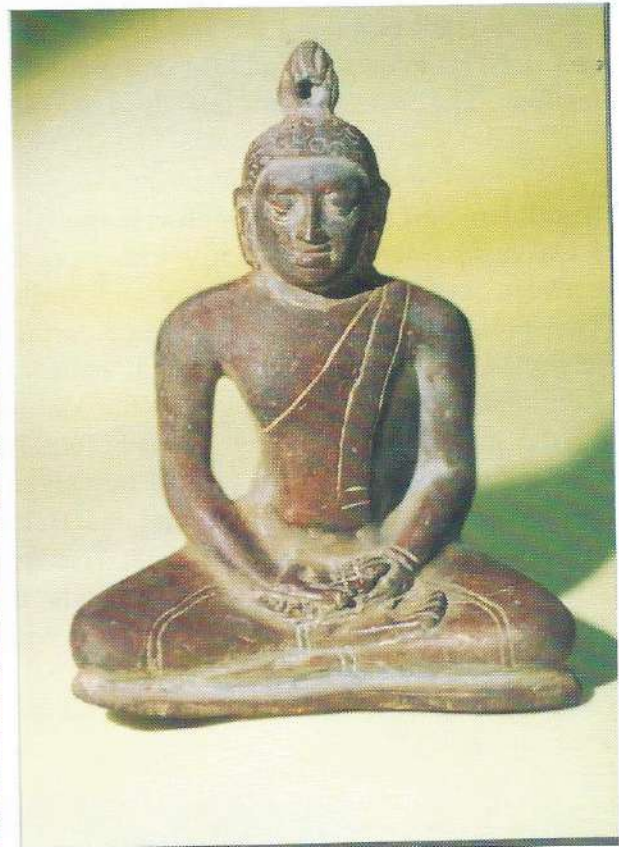


Fig. 3 b. *Bronze Buddha from Gaddho, Laamu Atoll, Maldives.*

A deposit box containing a collection of cowrie shells was found in a Buddhist monastery on the island of Maalhos in Baa atoll in the Maldives. Another such box from the island of Veymandhoo in Thaa atoll yielded 63 cowrie shells and a piece of gold with three fishes. These shells have been radiocarbon dated to AD 690-785 (T-13813). A small bronze Buddha has been found on the island of Gaddho in the Laamu atoll (Fig.3b), and a stone Buddha head comes from the island of Thoddoo (Didi 1959). Could new excavations of Buddhist monasteries in the Maldives help us to explain the spread of cowrie shells to Europe?

Before starting my excavations in 1996, I had formulated the hypothesis that a Buddhist high culture had been established on the Maldives in order to exploit the wealth of cowrie shells there, possibly around AD 500. Such a culture would have been founded on an exchange system with mainland India, Sri Lanka, or other parts of South Asia. Cowrie shells were distributed from the Maldives in exchange for certain foods, pottery, beads and metal objects. After the Arab conquest of India, which started in the 8th century (Nadwi 1934-35), parts of this exchange system were taken over by Arab traders (Hourani 1950).

In order to test this hypothesis, I planned a total excavation of a Buddhist monastery in the Maldives. The layout of the ruins, the structure of the temple, buildings and sculptured stones could provide evidence about the most probable contact areas elsewhere in Asia: where was the origin of the Buddhist culture on the Maldives? Finds of cowrie shells in specific contexts might indicate the importance and meaning of this commodity; finds of beads, precious stones, metal objects etc., linked to a Buddhist context - objects which have come from sacrifices and religious ceremonies - could also show which parts of Asia had the closest relations with the Maldives

Archaeological excavations at Kaashidhoo 1996-98.

In co-operation with National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research in Male, Republic of Maldives, a site on the island of Kaashidhoo in Kaaf atoll was chosen for excavation. This is situated at 4°57' N, 73° 28' E, 7 hours' journey by boat from the capital (fig.4). A tradition connected with a ruin area on the island said: "*A place called Kuruhinna tharaagadu. It is said that this was a house of worship*".(Maniku 1983).



Fig.4. Kaashidhoo Island, September 1998.

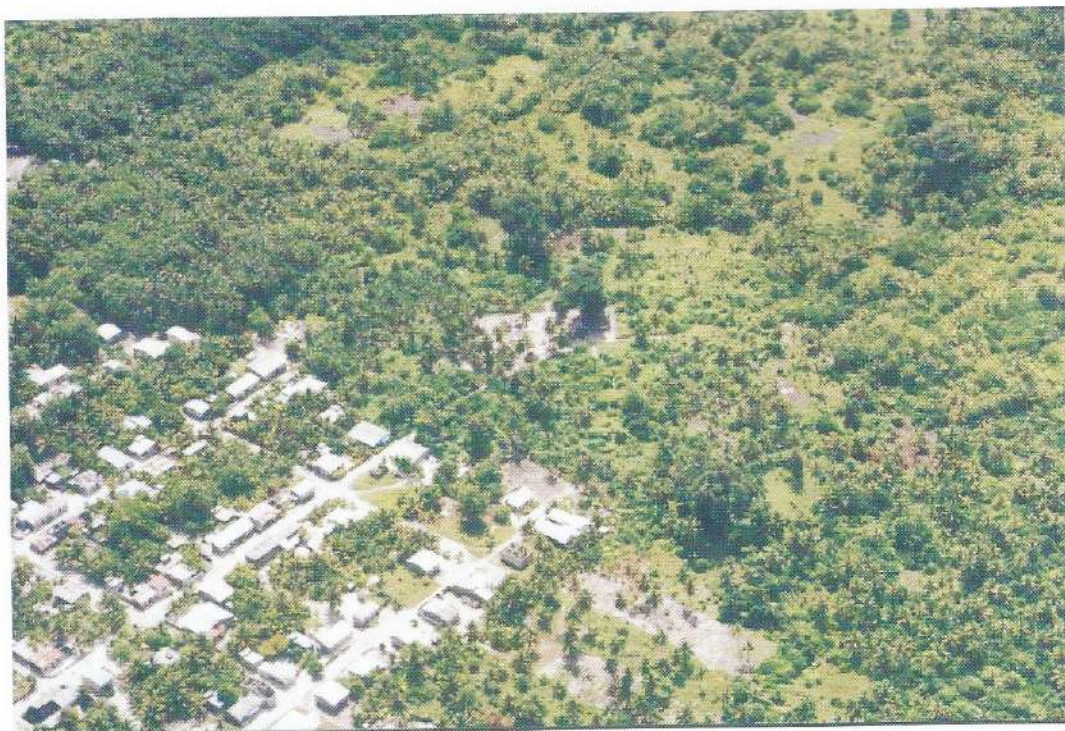


Fig.5. The village at Kaashidhoo, with the archeological site in the middle of the picture.

The site chosen for the excavations was situated just outside the houses of the village at Kaashidhoo, in a plantation consisting mainly of coconut, papaya and banana trees, gardening and with parts of a dense jungle vegetation in between. At the start of the investigations in 1996 there were a slight elevation here, about 1,5 m high, with coral stones visible on the surface. A very big tree was standing on the top, surrounded by other trees and jungle vegetation (Fig.5).



Fig.6. Excavation at Kaashidhoo 1996. Ruin I with the big tree to the left.

During three excavation campaigns in 1996-98 an area of 1,880 square metres, with 64 ruins, was investigated (Fig.6, 10). This is only a part of the original monastery; we do not know its total size. The structures uncovered were, except for one, made of coarse coral stone with lime plastering and mouldings on the outside; inside they were, as a rule, filled with sand or stones. There was a great variation in the size and shape of the structures: square, rectangular, circular (some with a semi-circular extension), while one was 16-sided. The size varied between one metre and 11.5 metres. Some bell-shaped structures are interpreted as miniature stupas. Most of the structures are platforms of various kinds, probably for light buildings of wood, reliquaries or as bases for statues etc. Only the lowermost parts of the structures (30-40 cm) had normally been preserved; the rest had been used as building material over the years. Several worked and profiled stones were collected during the excavations. Below, some characteristic structures excavated will be described in greater detail (Fig.7-8).



Fig.7. Southern part of excavated area at Kaashidhoo.



Fig.8. Northern part of the excavated area of Kaashidhoo.

The largest and most visible ruin before the start of the excavation was a square, pyramid-shaped structure measuring 11.5 m on each side; it had plastered walls, and the interior was filled with a huge amount of coarse coral stones (Fig.6), which formed a pyramid (ruin I). This is interpreted as the image house of the monastery (per. com. Senake Bandaranayake). Two stone fragments, which could be parts of an arm (of a Buddha statue?) were found by ruin I.



Fig. 9. Cowrie shell deposit, about 62,000, found in the corner of the flight of stairs of north ruin II.

Just north of this ruin, there was a square platform filled with sand. In a corner of this platform (ruin II), by the steps leading up to it, a deposit of cowrie shells, amounting to 62,000 shells, was found in a pit (Fig.9). These shells have been dated to AD 165-345 (T-12495). This is probably a sacrificial offer, or some other type of intentional deposit. Thus we have a well-documented cowrie shell deposit in a context of a Buddhist monastery here.

Ruin X was a square platform, 3.5 m on each side. A deposit of 17 clam shells and 2 other shells was found at the foundation level on the north side. This is also obviously an intentional deposit. The shells have been dated to AD 425-560 (T-12496).

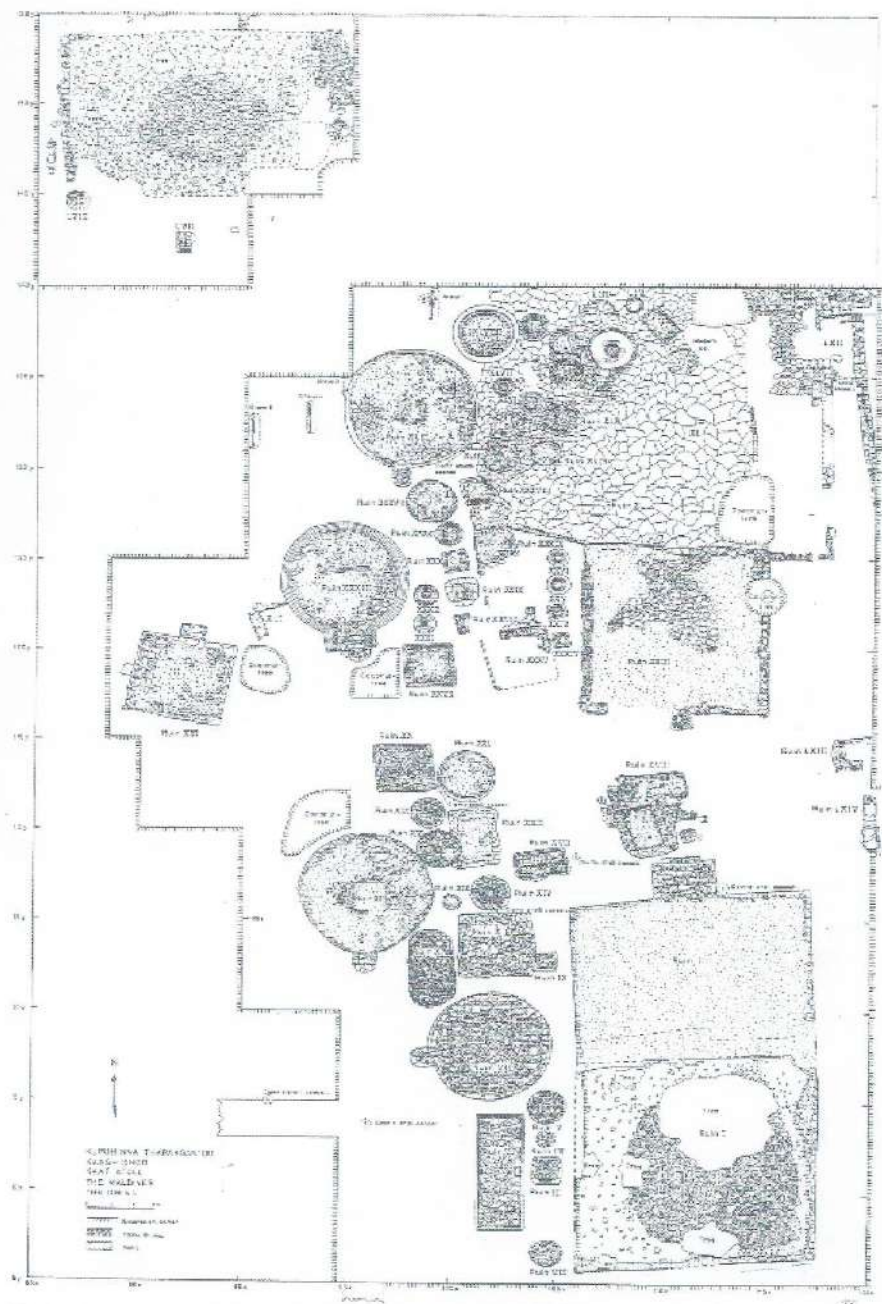


Fig.10. Plan of excavated site at Kaashidhoo.

An almost square platform (ruin XVI) was the only one entirely built of rectangular coral stone blocks, without lime plastering (up to 57 cm high). The sides measured 4.5-4.7 m. Whereas the other structures at the site were oriented N-S, E-W, this ruin was situated NNE-SSW. At the centre of the northern side there was a large, rectangular carved coral stone block, $1.2 \times 0.75 \times 0.35$ m, with a row of dentils along the top on three sides. This ruin was located at the highest level of the excavated ruin area, and is probably the most recent structure at the site.



Fig.11. The local excavation workers at Kaashidhoo 1997.



Fig.12. Two miniature stupas, ruin XXXI and XXXII.

Ruin XXVI is one of the best preserved bell-shaped miniature stupas, diameter 1.05 m, height 0.38 m. It contained coral stones, a black coral bead, one cowrie shell, and two other shells.



Fig.13. The 16-sided structure (ruinXXXIII), from the northwest.

Ruin XXXIII is a 16-sided structure with a platform at the top and a flight of stairs on the south side (Fig.13). This is one of the biggest and best preserved structures at the site, diameter 6 m, and a total height of 1.3 m. The base walls have five steps, and each of the 16 sides is slightly concave, with straight walls on the upper part. A bronze bowl (diameter 17 cm, height 7 cm) was found on the eastern side of this ruin.



Fig.14. Kaashidhoo: The well (ruinLII).



Fig.15. Two of the bigger circular structures at the Kaashidhoo site: ruin XLII in the background, ruin XLVII in the front, from the northwest.

The northern part of the excavated site is dominated by a plastered floor (ruin XL), 18.5 × 13.5 m, which continues into the unexcavated area to the north. This is interpreted as an old monastic living area (per. com. Senake Bandaranayake). This floor had later been covered by light coral sand, a layer of coral stones and another sand layer, and these were then partly covered by new structures of the monastery. A circular well (ruin LII), with a flight of stairs leading down to the inner platform with a diameter of 1.9 m and the actual well cylinder, which has a total depth of 1.65 m (Fig. 14). The well probably belongs to the original floor stage. Charcoal from the bottom of the well has been dated to AD 600-670 (TUa-2198).



Fig.16. The southern extension of ruin XLII, with big quantities of tortoise bones on the top. This is interpreted as an offering.

A circular platform (ruin XLII) (Fig.15), with a diameter of 6.5 m and a height of 0.6 m, is probably a relic shrine. The walls have a convex base and a straight top, with traces of the original platform at the top. In the middle of this platform there was a chamber built of rectangular stone blocks - it consisted of an upper room 80 × 76 cm (probably for a lid), and a smaller chamber further down. The latter measured 46 × 40 cm, while the depth was 36 cm. It was probably intended to house a relic casket or a deposit box. The finds from the filling of this chamber consisted of one plastered piece with traces of red paint, one cowrie shell and small pieces of a bronze bowl. More bronze fragments as well as parts of the probable lid were found outside. There was an extension to the south of this structure. Huge amounts of animal bones were found on top of this, obviously traces of sacrificial ceremonies. These bones have been analysed by Dr. Leif Jonsson, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Most surprisingly they were determined as coming from giant tortoise (*Aldabrachelys elephantina*), a species never previously encountered in the Maldives. Bones of small terrestrial turtle and sea turtle were also found on and around ruin XLII (Fig.16). That Buddhist monks kept tortoise in their temples for religious reasons is well known. The National Museum in Male' has a sea turtle made of coral stone, found in 1980, but relevant site information is lacking. Bones of the giant tortoise from ruin XLII at Kaashidhoo have been dated to AD 725-885 (T-13665).



Fig.17. Objects found inside ruinII

Ruin IL is a circular structure with a diameter of 1.53 m and a height of 0.25 m. When the sand filling inside this structure was excavated 2 small, red beads, 6 pieces of pottery,

dated to AD 500-620 (T-13666), while 2 small, pale blue beads were found in ruin XLVII; these were the most important finds.

Some of the shell deposits have already been mentioned. In addition to the cowrie shells, which were obviously of great importance in the religious life of the Kaashidhoo Buddhistic period, clam shells must also have had a religious significance. They had been laid down into the fill of the structures or, more commonly, at their base. It seems as though they had been sacrificed when the structure was built. Thus the four clam shell deposits which have been radiocarbon dated should help us to arrive at the date when the monastery was built. They range from AD 205 to AD 560 (with the exception of one single clam shell which has been dated to 40 BC - AD 115). Charcoal from two post-holes near ruin XVIII and from a pit west of ruin XI may also contribute to a dating of the building of the monastery. These dates range from AD 420 to AD 635, see Table I.

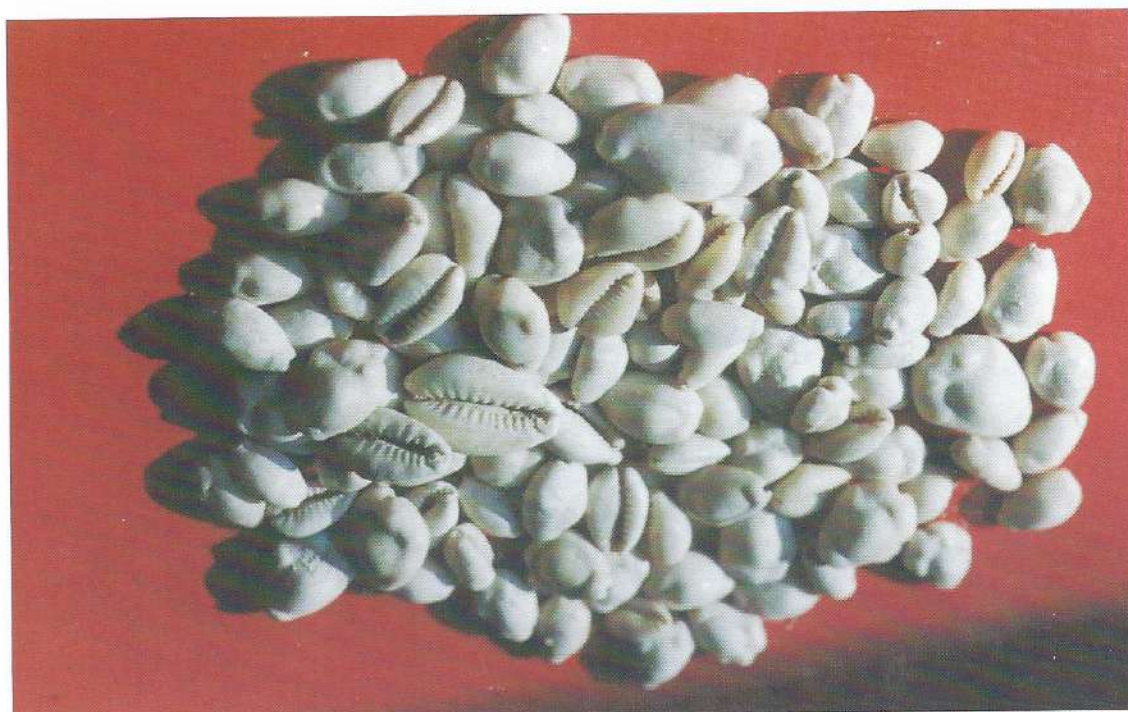


Fig.18. Cowrie shell deposit, with 106 shells, found east of ruin XVII.

Three cowrie shell deposits must be mentioned separately. They amounted to 106, 109 and 218 shells respectively. The first has been dated to AD 220-330 (T-13180) (Fig.18), the other two to AD 1170-1340 (T-13181 & T-13667). I would here point out that the Buddhist rosary consists of 108 beads. Could these cowrie shell deposits have been rosaries deposited at the monastic site, and are the cowrie shells with the latest dates examples of rosaries that were dug down at the site after the introduction of Islam in the 12th century? Or, do they indicate a longer life for Buddhism here on Kaashidhoo than on other islands in the Maldives? I cannot give any definite answer.

North and west of ruin XLII a thick layer of light grey sand had been deposited intentionally. 60-70 cm below the present soil surface several oblong dark fillings, 1.8-1.85 m long and 0.35-0.5 m wide, were uncovered. These were graves, part of a cemetery. Four of them were excavated. They were all oriented N-S, the body lying on its right side, with the hands between the legs, in the crutch. Pieces of pottery were found in the grave filling of all the graves and in one of them a silver finger-ring was found (Fig.19). Men as well as women were buried at this cemetery. The four graves have been radiocarbon dated to between AD 885 and 1170 (Table 1). They must thus represent the Buddhist period on the island, from a fairly late stage of the monastery. I have not yet found any comparative material for this burial practice.

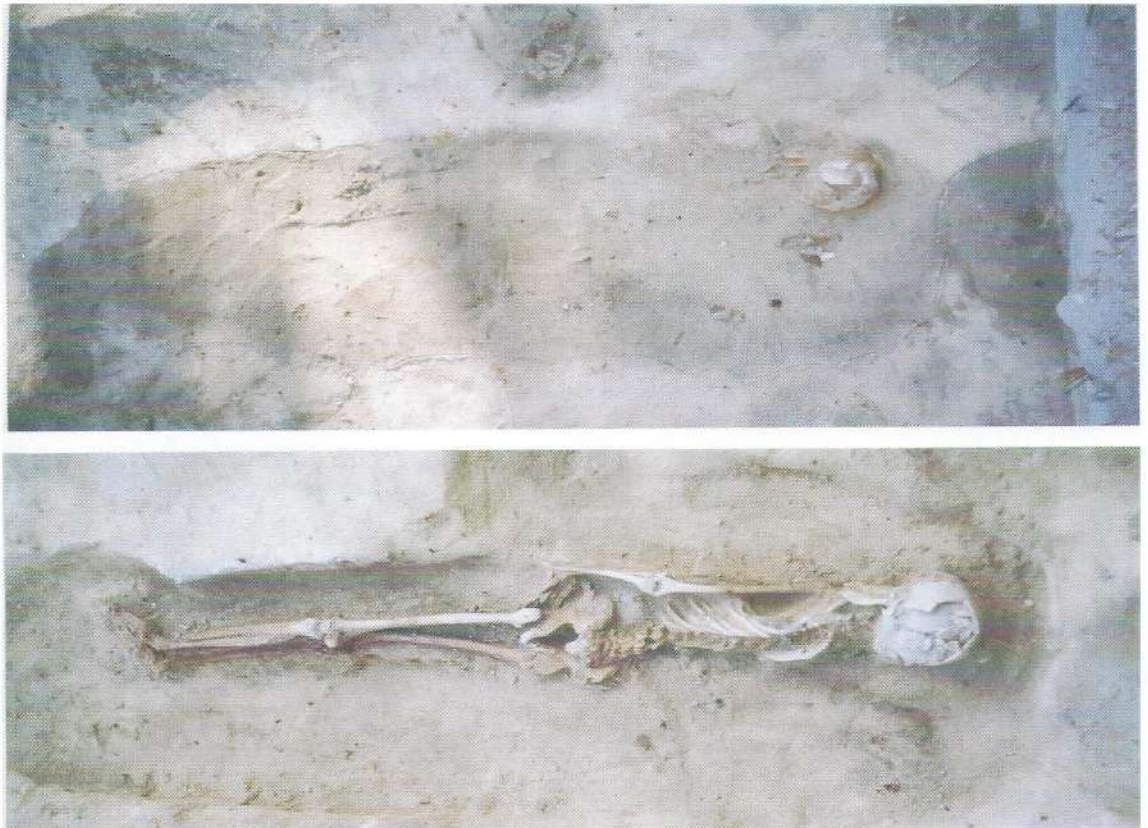


Fig.19a-b. Late Buddhist grave (grave1) at Kaashidhoo. a: The dark grave filling and the top of the skull, c: The skeleton in the grave pit.

Above I mentioned many of the artefacts found during the excavation: beads, bronze bowls and a silver finger-ring. The most common artefacts, however, were sherds of pottery, stone ware and china. These were found in considerable quantities on and between the ruins, but have not yet been fully studied. As there is no clay on the Maldives, all pottery must have come from abroad, from other parts of Asia. Most common is the coarse red pottery with thick rims, storage jars which probably came from India and Sri Lanka. Finer pottery decorated with lines, "brush" patterns etc. might come from India (cf. Rao 1994). The stone ware and china are mostly grey and light green bowls. The origin of many of these pieces dating from the 9th century onwards is Southern China, (pers.com.: Jan Wirgin, Stockholm).

Table I. Radiocarbon datings, Kaashidhoo, Kaaf atoll, Republic of Maldives

T-12495	Cowrie shell deposit (62,000)	Ruin II	1690 ± 65	AD 165 - 345
T-13180	Cowrie shell deposit (106)	E of ruin XVII	1680 ± 40	AD 220 - 330
T-13181	Cowrie shell deposit (109)	x96.0/y93.7	745 ± 75	AD 1170-1300
T-13667	Cowrie shell deposit (218)	x91.3/y95.0	660 ± 65	AD 1260-1340
T-13666	Cowrie shell offering (17)	Inside ruin XLIIIB	1430 ± 45	AD 500 - 620
T-13665	Cowrie shell offering (8)	Inside ruin IL	1360 ± 70	AD 560 - 680
T-13680	Giant tortoise offering (bones)	On ruin XLII	1220 ± 55	AD 725 - 885
T-13669	Clam shell deposit	x118/y135	1685 ± 45	AD 205 - 335
T-13182	Clam shell deposit	Ruin XX/XXI	1585 ± 45	AD 330 - 435
T-13668	Clam shell deposit	Ruin XLII x100.5/y131.5	1530 ± 60	AD 385 - 530
T-12496	Clam shell deposit	N of ruin X	1500 ± 60	AD 415 - 560
T-13183	Clam shell	Ruin XVIIIC/B	1880 ± 65	BC 40 - AD 115
TUa-1444	Charcoal	Pit W of ruin XI	1555 ± 65	AD 430 - 600
TUa-1883	Charcoal	Post-hole 1, ruin XVIII	1580 ± 60	AD 420 - 555
TUa-1884	Charcoal	Post-hole 2, ruin XVIII	1505 ± 60	AD 535 - 635
TUa-2198	Charcoal	Ruin LII (well)	1415 ± 70	AD 600 - 670
TUa-2227	Human bone	Grave 1	955 ± 65	AD 1015 - 1170
TUa-2228	Human bone	Grave 2	1015 ± 65	AD 985 - 1040
T-13678	Human bone	Grave 3	1100 ± 70	AD 885 - 1015
T-13679	Human bone	Grave 4	1080 ± 75	AD 890 - 1020

A Chinese bronze coin was also found at the site, a cash-coin from the Northern Song Dynasty, struck under the Emperor T'ai Tsung in AD 990-94 (pers.com.: Kolbjørn Skaare, Oslo; Lockhart 1915:8 No.373, Pl.53 No.373).

A number of different small bronze rings and iron fragments were also among the artefacts found at the site.

There were several different stages in the building of the monastery. This could be observed during the excavations: the structures were founded at different levels, on older floors, and in some places white coral sand had been used for covering old structures in order to build new. No stratigraphical evaluation has as yet been carried out. Therefore I regard the monastery as one single entity at present.

The building of the monastery probably started in the beginning of the 3rd century AD. The main building period and the first monastic period of the site continued until around AD 600. The building of miniature stupas and sacrificial ceremonies continued through the 7th to the 9th century. During the last monastic period, before Islam was introduced on the island, part of the site was used as a cemetery, from the 10th until the late 12th century. Kaashidhoo was, according to oral tradition (pers. com. Hassan Maniku), the place where Buddhism survived for longest in the Maldives.

From where was Buddhism introduced into the Maldives, and where do we find the closest parallels to the monastic structures at Kaashidhoo? Here, too, I have only just started my studies. What I present now is mainly based on discussions with Professor Senake Bandaranayake at Sri Lanka and Dr.P. Ragupathy.

The only Buddhist site on Sri Lanka showing some similarities with the Kaashidhoo monastery is one at *Kantarodai* on the Jaffna peninsula. The ruined buildings there are also built of coral stones, and the great number of small, round structures, probably miniature stupas, are characteristic (Godakumbura 1968; Ragupathy 1987:168).

In India there are many similarities in the types of construction found at Kaashidhoo and in *Ratnagira* in Orissa (Mitra 1981; 1983). *Nagarjunakonda* (Longhurst 1938; Ramachandran 1953) and *Salihundam* (Mitra 1971 (1983):221-2) in Andhra Pradesh must also be studied, as well as *Taxilia* in Northern Pakistan (Marshall 1951).

The oldest written sources on the Maldives

The oldest written sources on the Maldives might solve some of the problems of the Buddhist origin of the monastic culture as well as of the trade relations during the pre-Islamic period of the Maldives.

The first probable mentions of the Maldives are in Indian and Sri Lankan *Buddhist sources* referring to events around 300-250 BC. There has been pointed out that there is a reference in the *Mahavamsa* which might be interpreted as supporting the present hypothesis that Sinhalese and Maldivian separated from the mainland (India) at the same time (Geiger 1912; Silva 1971). This could mean that the spread of Buddhism from India to the islands took place at such an early time.

The next group of written sources on the Maldives, from the period AD 90-522, are by *Greek writers*. The information they give shows that the Maldives were known in the classical Mediterranean world. The more important sources are Ammianus Marcellinus

(AD 362), who tells that the Maldives sent ambassadors, bringing gifts to the Roman Emperor Julianus (Rolfe 1937; Gray 1888:426-7). The other source is the first probable eye-witness description we have of the Maldives, when Cosmos Indicopleustes travelled to India in AD 522. He mentions

the two most obvious characteristics of the Maldives for a sea traveller: the occurrence of fresh water and the coconut trees. He also mentions two export articles from the islands: the cowrie shells and ambergris (McCridle 1897). This is the first time cowrie shells from the Maldives are mentioned in written sources.

The next group of written sources elucidating the Maldives are *Chinese documents and writers*, from the period AD 630-792. The most important are documents from AD 658 and 662, which tell that the Maldives sent ambassadors to the king of China, giving tributes of their country's products (Pelliot 1904). This must be interpreted as a sort of gift exchange between the two countries. The same source mentions the Maldives' dependence on a king of South India. These sources show the well-developed political and social relation that had been established during the 7th century, with China as well as with India.

During the period AD 850-1150, *the Persian and the Arabic sources* are the only written sources on the Maldives that we know. This was a time when the Arabs totally dominated the sea-trade in the Indian Ocean (Hourani 1950). The most important and trustworthy of these were Sulaiman (AD 850), a merchant and possibly an eye-witness to the conditions on the Maldives (Ferrand 1922; Gray 1888:428), Abdul Hassan Ali El Masudi who visited Sri Lanka in AD 916 (Sprenger 1841), Abu el Hassan (AD 1026) (Reinaud 1845) and Sharif al Idrisi (AD 1150) (Jaubert 1836-40; Elliot & Dowson 1867). These writers give detailed information about the Maldives, its pre-Islamic society and life, production, trading routes and merchandise.

Nearly all of them are concerned about the Maldives being ruled by a woman, a queen. Her wealth was to a large degree based on the large quantities of cowrie shells which she kept in the royal depot. She collected taxes from her people and gave some of her wealth back as charity. This form of reciprocity is very common within ranked societies like chiefdoms (Service 1971).

Products mentioned in the Arabic sources also included tortoise shell, coconut ropes and dried fish, commodities not visible in the archaeological material (except for preserved animal bones).

Conclusions

The archaeological excavations at Kaashidhoo in the Maldives have shown that a Buddhist culture was established in the first part of the first millennium AD, probably founded on an Indian origin. Exchange relations were established with South Asia and, according to written sources, also with the Roman World, and later also with China. Cowrie shells played an important role in the Buddhist culture and religion, symbolically as well as economically. Around AD 500, when cowrie shells spread to northern and central Europe, as shown by archaeological finds in these regions, they are also mentioned as trading products from the Maldives. The ruler of the islands seems to have established control over this cowrie shell trade and exchange, which led to the import of other commodities, such as beads, gold, silver and other metal objects, as well as pottery and china in exchange from other part of Asia. This provided for a rich Buddhist monastic culture in the Maldives. It was possibly also the start of the spread of cowrie shells to the north, through many links and with the possibility of change of content and meaning on their way. Distance in itself is not necessarily a limitation on contact.

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