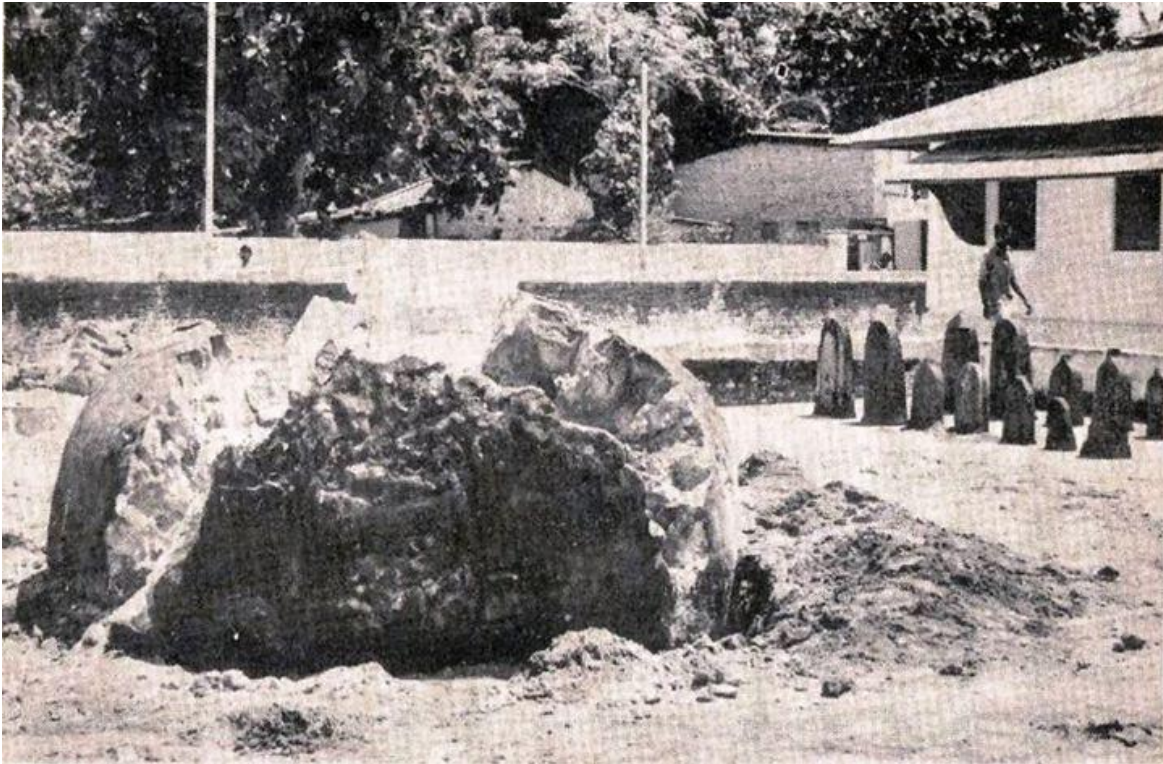


The Stupa at Bodugalu Miskiy, Male'

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18 September 2011



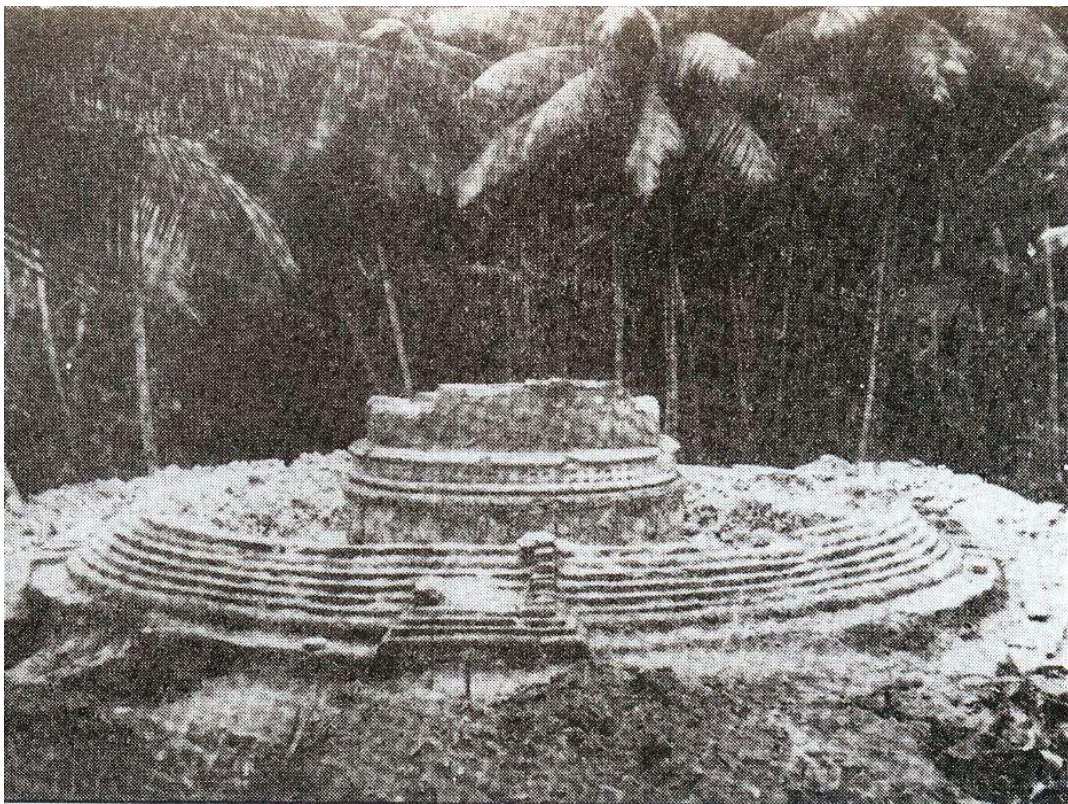
The "big stone" that gave name to Bodugalu Miskiy in Male', a renowned mosque in the capital of Maldives, was the remains of a small Maldivian stupa or chedi built with coral stone. It had quietly survived eight hundred years, after having been defaced at the moment of conversion by having had the spire at the top broken. What remained was what looked like a big stone (bodugaa) near the small mosque.

The picture shows the 'Bodugalu' already broken, in the background on the right a neat row of graves with their tombstones and the Bodugalu mosque. The evident marks of freshly disturbed earth around the cracked chedi and the whiteness of the coral in the broken inner sides indicate that the photograph was taken when the chedi was being demolished. The mosque seen on the right side of the picture and its adjacent graveyard were also destroyed in 1976, following new-fangled guidelines in the urbanization of the capital of Maldives, Male'. The face of the city would change much during the last quarter of the 20th century.

Dr. Ahmed Razee pointed out that not all of this stupa was destroyed and scattered, stating that '*... a chunk of this is still around in front of Kulunuvehi building.*'

The Stupa at Bodugalu Miskiy was a historical landmark that gave name to a mosque and to some families in Male'. It might be claimed that some Muslims may feel strongly about the display of a symbol of ancient Maldivian Buddhism, a different faith. But that should have not mattered, because the stupa had lost its most important part, the spire, so it had become merely a familiar sight, an old stone without religious meaning. There was no valid reason to destroy it.

However, some Maldivians have reminded me that it is right for such old things to disappear. They don't see such remains as a national treasure at all and often indicate that the concern of foreigners for their own cultural identity is misplaced. They basically wish to be left alone to continue the destruction. On the other hand, I know many Maldivians who care for such monuments and think they should be safeguarded.



It is not an exaggeration to assert that more of the ancient cultural remains of the Maldives have been destroyed in the last fifty years than in the previous eight centuries that followed the conversion. One only needs to travel to Toddu Island, to realize that not much is left of the coral stone stupa in the picture above that was photographed by Ali Najeeb when the trees and shrubs that were covering the archaeological remains were cleared last century.

The uncontrolled devastation of the cultural heritage is not limited to the ancient Maldivian Buddhist ruins. Across the Atolls of the Maldives numerous old mosques, graveyard stones and other ancient remains of Islamic historical value have suffered the same fate in the most recent decades.

No amount of official protection can keep these silent stones from the attacks of a vandal, or the haste and recklessness of a constructor, if there is not a general agreement about their importance to the nation. In order to preserve the National Archaeological Heritage of the Maldives, there is a need for unanimity. The ancient monuments can only be preserved for the future generations, when all Maldivian people without exception agree that their conservation is not only up to the government, but upon a general agreement that they are something to be valued and protected.

After the publication of this article Maldivian journalist Sim Ibrahim Mohamed reflected:

'It's a pity that the preservation of the work and craft of our ancestors is and has been at the mercy of political elites, in Male' and the Atolls. The fact that durable material except for coral stone was not available to ancient craftsmen here compounded the problem. Even the hardiest of wood decays exposed to the harsh elements, especially the sun and the rain. It is not too late, I believe, to save what is left after the wanton destruction of the fifties through the seventies. But how committed are we to reclaim our heritage? I don't know.'

*2011 article published in **A Secular Maldives** on 5 August 2014.*