

## CHAPTER 4

### ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY OF MALDIVES

#### UNTIL 12<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CE

The ideas on initial colonization of Maldives islands are shrouded in mystery owing to a lack of extensive investigation. According to oral traditions, the first settlers of these islands were a tribe called *Dheyvis* from Kalibangan in the Indian subcontinent who were nature-worshippers and their leader was addressed as *Sawami*. Other tribes who arrived here include *Redis*, *Kunbis* and *Sarandivis*. In addition, it is believed that *Aryas* reached Maldives in c. 500 BCE. According to another tradition the Northern atolls were occupied by people from South India. During this time the Brahmanical religion was also introduced to the country. The first king believed to have been a prince from Kalinga who was ousted by his father Brahmadhittiya from his country. It is also believed that at the time of Emperor Asoka, in the second century BCE, several people travelled from Bairat in India, bringing the Buddhist faith to Maldives (Mohammed 2005) (cf Shihabbudinne 1650-1687) .

The earliest references to the Maldives in historical documents and literature are very ambiguous to support any particular model of origins in these islands. However, available archaeological evidence and linguistic analysis propose either an Indian or Sri Lankan origin. The *Commentary on the Bharu Jataka* and the *Khuddapatha*, early Buddhist texts, and the earliest chronicles *Dipavamsa* (4th century BCE), and the *Mahavamsa* (3rd century BCE) provides the early references to the Maldives (Maloney 2005).

Considerable amount of information on Maldives' maritime history can be gathered from several accounts of voyages to the Indian Ocean written by Middle Eastern, Western and Chinese travellers. Ptolemy (c. 90-150 CE) mentioned 1378 islands situated around *Taprobane* (Stevenson 1932), and listed some names, a few of which could be Maldivian islands. Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis (c.360-430 CE) also wrote of "a thousand other islands" called *Maniolae* (Maldives) that lie around *Taprobane*. These islands are mentioned in the Greek text *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* in which the author documents the export of tortoise shell from the islands called *Limiruke* in the first century CE, which has been identified as Maldives

islands (Casson 1989). Pappas of Alexandria about the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE mentions about Sri Lanka being one of the largest islands of the world adjacent to 1370 other islands. Ptolemy talk about a large number of islands in front of *Taprobane* (Sri Lanka) in 127-141 CE. Ammianus Marcellinus cited about emissaries sent to Rome from the Maldives in 326 CE. Cosmos Indicopleustes (535-550 CE) described Maldives as a great emporium of island with huge amounts of coconut and fresh water. The next references of Maldivians travelling are detailed in a Chinese document belongs to the Tang Dynasty, written between 785 and 805 CE. This document accounts two voyages of Maldivians to China, the first in 658 CE and the second in 662 CE during the reign of the Maldivian King Baladitiya (Bell 1940).

Arab travellers like Abu Zayd's account (916 CE) described that Indian traders sold water obtained from the Maldives to boats. Al Idrisi's account gives information on the introduction of Islam in the region, turtle shell trade, the cowrie shell extraction and the burning of sandalwood at homes. *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta* dated to the fourteenth century CE and the accounts of the shipwrecked French traveller François Pyrard de Laval (c. 1602–1607) are commonly accredited as the valuable ethnographic resource for the Maldives islands (Maloney 2013).

The artefacts presented in this chapter reflect the traces of the material culture which belongs to the pre Islamic period of the social and cultural history of the Maldives Islands. The artefact assemblage is derived from two sources. A limited however territorially representative sample has been acquired from the excavations done in various sites. The second source is the artefacts obtained from the explorations carried out in different islands which are displayed in the National Museum of Male. It is to be noted that several artefacts exhibited at the Maldives National Museum, including Buddhist statues were destroyed in a mob attack on February 7, 2012, an act of vandalism which caused indescribable loss to the precious Maldivian heritage. The artefacts presented in this study were mainly documented during the visit prior to the incident. Since the country has not released the details of the objects destroyed, the details cannot be provided in this work. The estimated provenance and the physical characteristics of those artefacts have been documented on the basis of the information received. However site formation and climatic changes affected the

quantitative and qualitative analysis those artefacts replicate a range of information on Pre Islamic past of Maldives Islands.

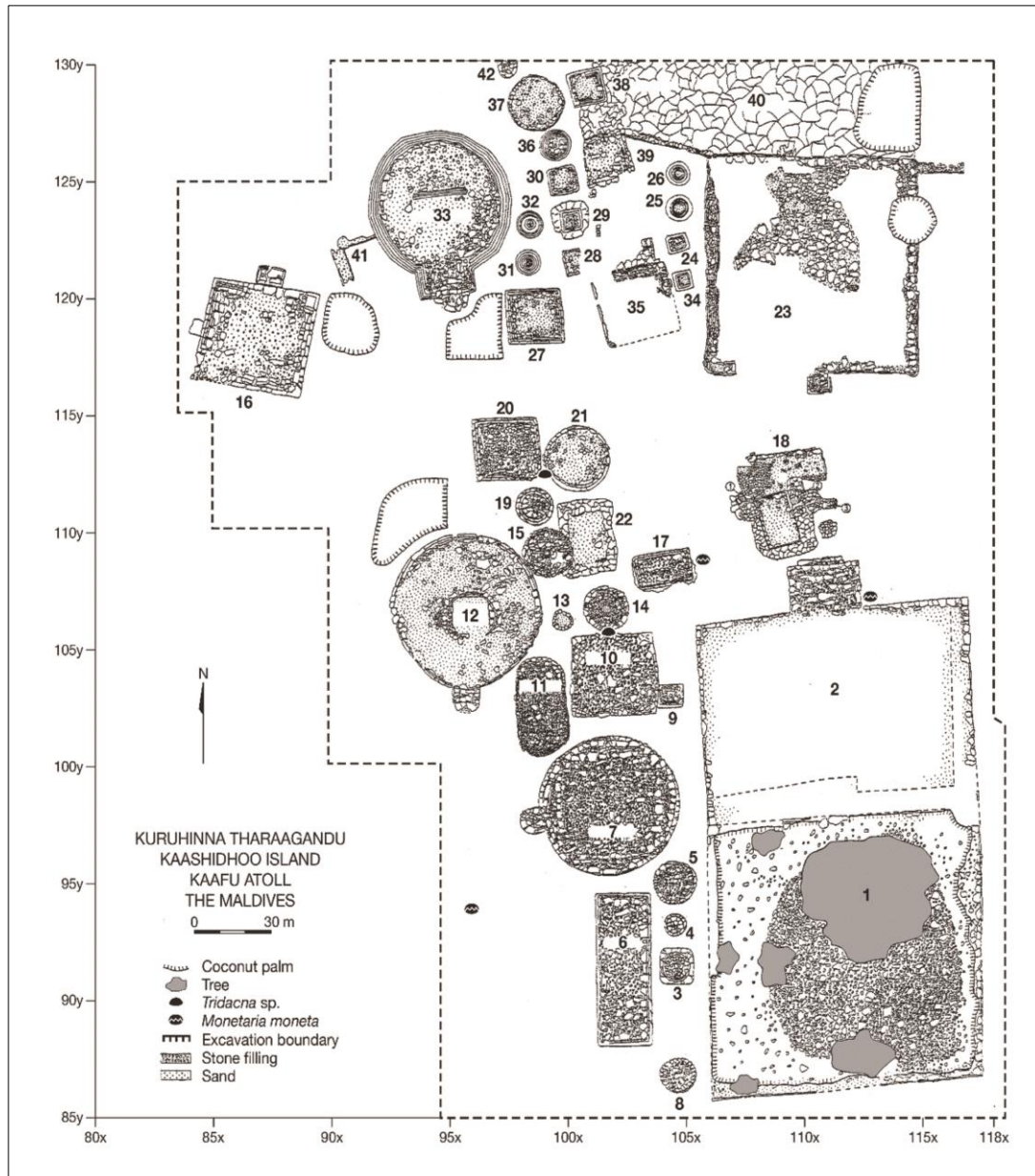
#### **4.1 Analysis of structural remains**

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, a series of excavations were carried out jointly by Kon-Tiki museum, the University of Oslo and the Maldivian Government during 1981-1984. The SAARC conducted another investigation during 1986-1987 and the very first major excavation by Egil Mikkelsen from University of Oslo was done during 1996-1998. The objective of these excavations was to understand the depositional environment of each site, its stages of development and to characterize the cultural developments. The sites from North, Central and Southern Maldives were selected based on the assessment of archaeological potential. The details of the structural remains are as follows:

##### **4.1.1 Monastery at Kashidhoo**

This monastic site is situated in the northern atolls of the Maldives and was excavated during the three field seasons from 1996-1998 by Egil Mikkelsen and the University of Oslo. It is locally known as Kuruhinna Tharagadu which means ‘house of worship’. An area of about 1,800 m<sup>2</sup> was excavated which revealed 64 ruins and four human burials (Mikkelsen 2000).

The structures exposed in the excavation were mainly bases, which varied in size and shape varied from square, circular, some with ancillary features like steps, rectangular and 16 sided structure whose sizes ranged from 1-11.5 m (fig 4.1). According to the excavators, different phases of structural activity were noticed. It is suggested that during the first phase, dated to third century CE, the construction of monastery began. The second phase witnessed the construction of main building which took place in 600 CE. The miniature stupas were constructed during the third phase i.e.; during the seventh – ninth centuries CE and the fourth phase corresponds to the latest occupation of the site and includes the transition to Islam. The final occupation of the site is seen in the cemetery in the north of the monastery which can be dated to late twelfth century CE. (Mikkelsen 2000)



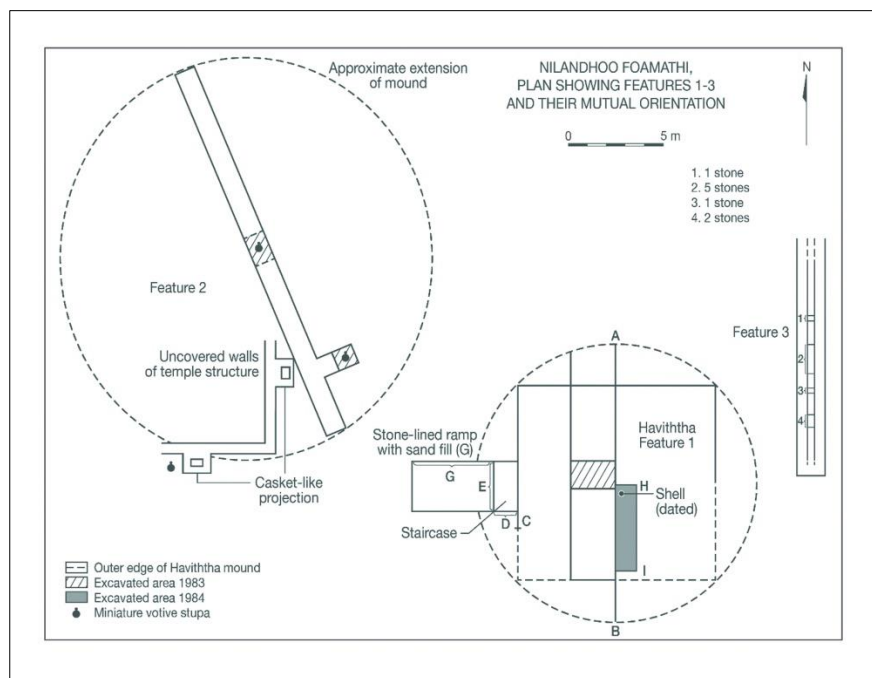
**Figure 4.1 Site plan of Kuruhinna Tharaagadu**

**Credit: Modified from Mikkelsen (2000)**

The artefact assemblage recovered from the excavation consists of ceramics, glass, beads made of coral and clay, metal fragments and a bronze Chinese coin. Excavation of the burial complex at the north of the site exposed human burials at a depth of 60–70 cm in north-south orientation. The burial goods comprised of ceramics and metal rings (Mikkelsen 2000). The calibrated dates obtained from the samples of charcoal, shell and bone from Kuruhinna Tharaagadu illustrate an occupation of the site from 345–604 CE to 1024–1224 CE (Mikkelsen 2000).

#### 4.1.2 Buddhist remains at Nilandhoo Foamathi

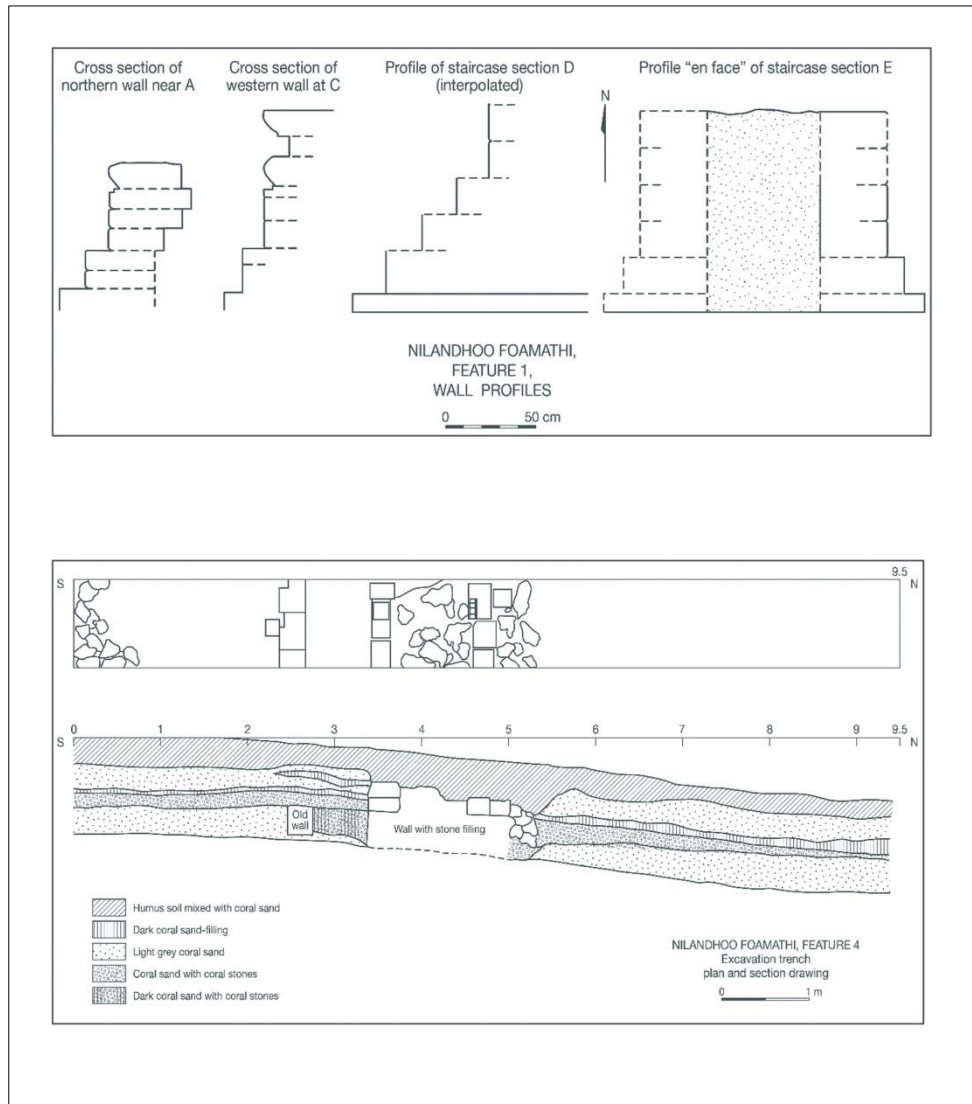
Nilandhoo Foamathi also referred to as Nilandhoo Foavvalhi is located in the central atolls of Maldives islands (Fig 4.2). This site was excavated as a part of Norwegian-Maldivian expedition from 1983-1984. The site is famous for the first mosque construction outside of the capital city of Male known as Asaari Misikiy. The mosque was constructed using the coral stones from the Buddhist sites (Bopardikar 1992). Two coral stone votive stupas and three reliquaries, with one containing a gold rooster statue were found from this site earlier, which testified the cultural potentiality of the site.



**Figure 4.2 Plan showing the excavated remains in Nilandhoo Foamathi**

**Credit: After Skjølsvold (1991)**

The main aim of the investigation was to excavate the *Havitha* mound and to collect samples for dating purposes as no radio carbon dating had been done. The excavations revealed structural remains consisting of two wall features, a *Havitha* mound, a partially excavated structure and a circular bath. Two trenches were laid across the interior of the *Havitha* mound and were partially excavated. This excavation also revealed moulded stones used in the construction of the walls composed of greyish limestone of which the profile can be seen (fig 4.3).



**Figure 4.3 Wall profile and Section drawing , Nilandhoo Foamathi**  
**Credit: After Skjølsvold (1991)**

Two wall structures were discovered during the excavation of *Havitha*. According to the excavators the stones used in the construction of the walls have been reused from another structure as evident from the non-uniformity in size and similarity to those found on the wall of *Havitha*. In addition to all these structures, a well preserved circular bath was also situated in the south- western portion of the complex which was partially uncovered. Non-structural material culture recovered from this excavation

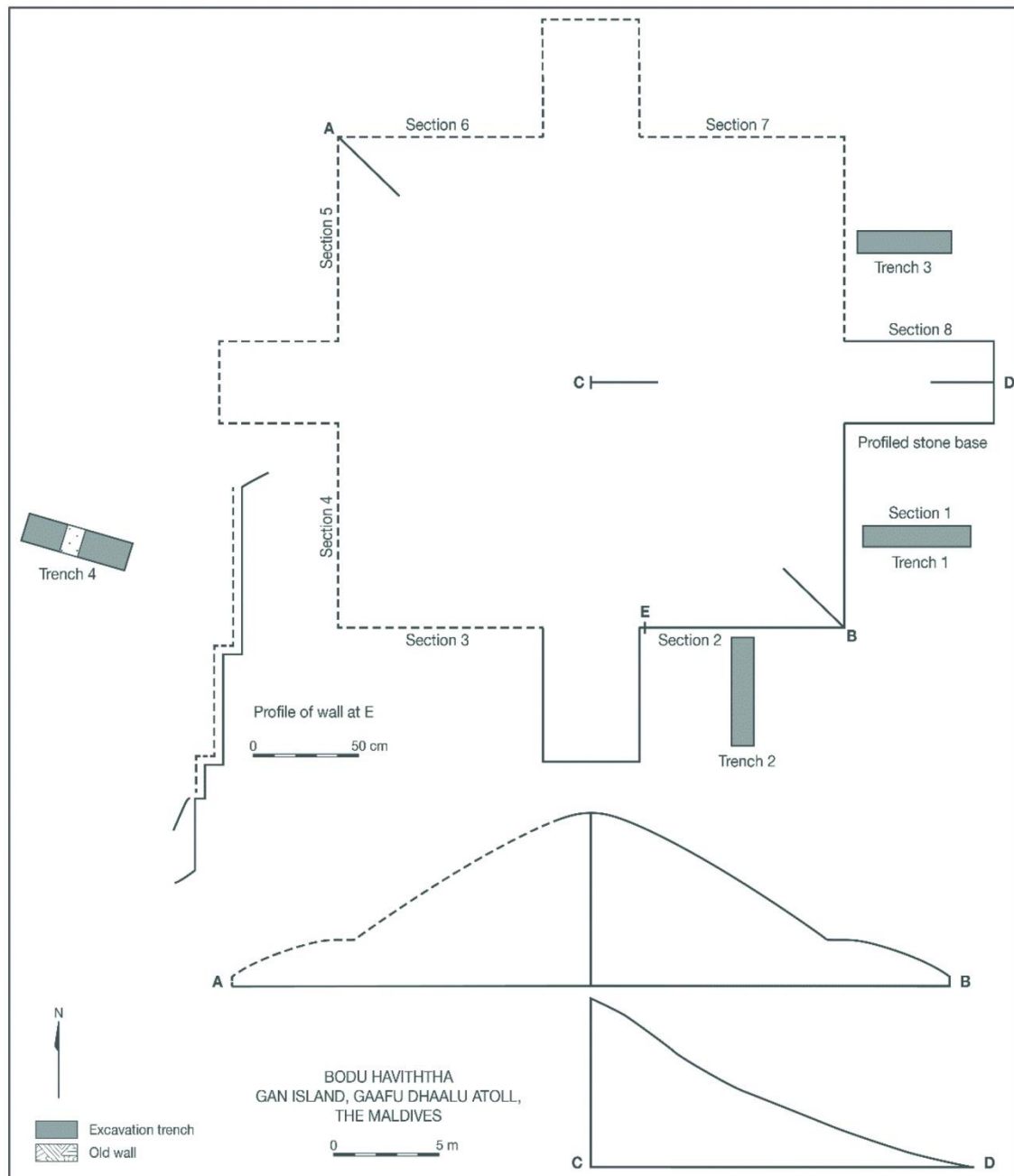
included cowries, shells, bone remains, stone artefacts which included votive stupas and ceramics.

Charcoal and shell samples were examined to obtain dates of this site. Seven charcoal dates were obtained from the exposed wall area and also of marine shells. The earliest dates from Nilandhoo were associated with a *Cocos nucifera* sample and were dated to a period of 249-393 CE. It was associated with the refused deposit near the exposed wall area in the northern portion of the complex, whereas shell samples give a date range from 1170-1423 CE (Litster 2016).

#### **4.1.3 Bodu *Havitha* on Gan Island and Dhadimagi in Fuvamulah**

In the southern Maldives, excavations were carried out at two sites viz; Bodu *Havitha* on Gan island in Huvadhuatholu Dhekunuburi and Dhadimagi *Havitha* in Fuvamulah. Gan Island is an uninhabited island due to an unspecific epidemic at the end of eighteenth century which caused rapid depopulation. Several *Havitha* mounds are present in the island viz; Gamu *Havitha* located in the central island, three mounds in the western shore, south-western shores and south eastern shore. The excavated site Bodu *Havitha* is situated in the north western side of the island (Skjolsvold 1991).

Excavations in Bodu *Havitha* lasted for 3 days in 1983 to clear the vegetation to establish the limit of the structure and extension of the site. In the field season in 1984 during six days work, the team attempted to open four adjacent trenches to obtain cultural materials and samples for dating. A square shaped four sided *Havitha* with four ramps attached to all the sides and an outer enclosing wall was unearthed (Fig 4.4).



**Figure 4.4 Site Plan and Profiles of Bodu *Havitha*.**

**Credit: After Skjølsvold (1991)**



During this excavation, 62 decorated and moulded stone fragments were discovered. Other major finds include part of a Buddha figure, *Buddhapada*, lion figures, dome shaped miniature stupas, stupa finials, railing stones, rectangular stone slab displaying an animal figure, earthen wares, coral bead and bone fragments (Skjolsvold 1991). Only one date, derived from a bone sample was obtained from this site. It gave a calibrated date of 540-660 CE. However, problems related to the lack of substantial bone collagen resulted in the rejection of the date (Skjolsvold 1991).

Dhadimagi *Havitha* located in the north eastern side of the Fuvamulah Island was originally investigated by H C P Bell in 1922 and by Manikku in 1946. This is the site from where three coral stone caskets were discovered (Bell 1940). The site was covered with debris and vegetation and a short term survey was undertaken during the visit of Norwegian- Maldivian expedition in 1983 and consequently resulted in a day long investigation in 1984. Clearance work was carried out in *Havitha* and excavations were carried out in the western side of the area to understand the scope and nature of the construction (Skjolsvold 1991).

The structural remains include the *Havitha* having a circumference of about 70 m and a height of 18.2 m. The remains of four terraced walls and a bath structure was also recovered from the site. The artefact assemblage from this limited small scale excavation included materials linked to the most recent Islamic period, fish remains, ceramics etc. No radio carbon dates were obtained from this site. The *Havitha* belongs to Buddhist period and might have continued till the advent of Islam during the twelfth century CE (Skjolsvold 1991).

## **4.2 Ceramics**

No detailed analyses of ceramics assemblages are undertaken so far. Limited analyses were made of the ceramics to understand the typology and understand the interaction between Maldives and other communities associated with Indian Ocean trade network, to identify the extent of trade, transportation and migration. The aforesaid elements are significant to establish the process of Urbanisation. It is to be noted that Maldives islands are coralline and clay resources are completely absent for manufacturing of pottery. Hence, the presence of ceramics here reveals that they were

imported from outside the archipelago and will also provide valuable information on trade networks.

The previous studies include Carswell's assessment of Sasanian- Islamic glazed ware from undated contexts in which he argues that this low amount of western material and presence of large quantity of Chinese pottery recovered in Male indicates one way east to west traffic (Carswell 1976). Mikkelsen (2000) reported South Asian ceramics from Kuruhinna Tharaagadu, which includes Red ware which are impressed or plain, devoid of slip and found in forms of carinated bowls, *handis* and lids.

Surveys conducted by Archaeological survey of India in Maldives and Lakshadweep islands during 1980s reported that the ceramic assemblage termed as Red Wares are predominantly friable and prone to breakage and likely to have Indian provenance (Bopardikar 1992; Tripathi 1999). Northern Black Polished Ware has also been reported from Androth Island in Laksadweep (Rao *et al* 1995).

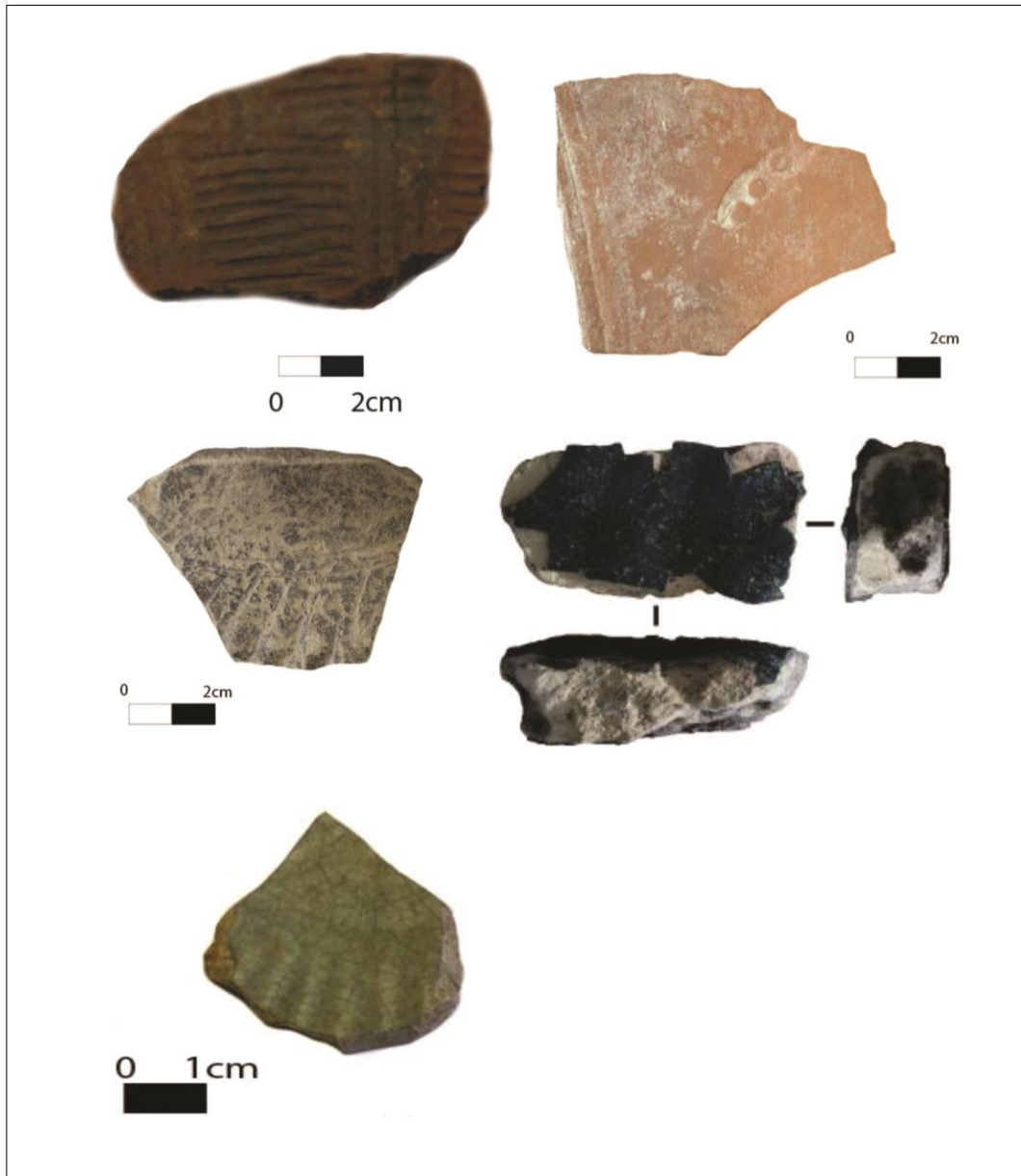
Excavations at Kuruhinna Tharaagadu and surveys in Male by Carswell and the Archaeological survey of India during 1986-1987 recovered considerable quantities of Chinese ceramics in which Longquan Celadon needs special mention (Mikkelsen 2000; Carswell 1976; Bopardikar 1992).

The ceramics recovered from the expedition of University of Oslo were transported to the Culture-History museum at the University of Oslo in Norway whereas ceramics from the Norwegian – Maldivian investigation was transported to the Kon-Tiki Museum in Oslo. Preliminary investigations of the ceramics were undertaken by Skjolsvold (1991), in which he provides counts of sherds per excavation unit and Mikkelsen (2000) by providing summary of the sherds from Kuruhinna Tharaagadu. Further analysis of the ceramics was done which include ware identification and a preliminary fabric analysis (Litster 2016). According to the study, ware families from Maldivian assemblages were classified into four groups. They are as follows:

- (i) Far Eastern group which includes all Chinese ceramics datable to first and second millennium CE, which was distributed in the entire Indian Ocean regions.
- (ii) South Asian group which includes earthen ware and fine ware mainly from India and Sri Lanka. These varieties of ceramics have been recovered throughout Indian Ocean.
- (iii) Western Asian group which comprises of all ceramics from the Gulf and the Red Sea areas.
- (iv) Unknown group which includes any unknown ceramics. (Litster 2016).

Litster (2016) also identified ware types which included Longquan Celadon which is a Chinese ceramic type of Green Glazed Ware. This was extensively exported to the western Indian ocean, near east and to the Mediterranean. Paddle Impressed Ware which is decorated with grooved paddles were also identified (fig 4.5). This is found in the Early Historic periods from various sites in South India and has South East Asian origin. This type of pottery was reported from Khalkkattapatna and from Early Medieval level of Periyapatinam of Tamil Nadu, Kottapatnam of Andhra Pradesh, Manapattu of Puducherry, Cheramanparambu, Taikal, Kottappuram, and Pattanam of Kerala (Selvakumar 2011). Another variety identified is Northern Black Polished Ware which is the most distinctive ceramic of Early Historic period, supposed to have been manufactured in the Ganges region during the latter half of the first millennium CE and distributed all over South Asia and Lakshadweep Islands. Lister failed to give a proper description of the ceramics; however from the appearance of the ceramics, it appears that these ceramics cannot be classified as Northern Black Polished Ware. Further analysis is needed to confirm this. The Red polished Ware is the next variety which has a fine well levigated brick red body with thin orange-red slip. Mica is visible on its surface (Kennet 2004). This ware is significant as it is considered as a datum line for establishing the cultural sequence of the Early Historic sites in Gujarat, Western India. The earliest dates for Indian RPW is assigned to first century CE (Kennet 2004). The last type is the Sassanian Islamic Ware (fig), whose distribution is evident in the Indian ocean region ranging from Gulf, east Africa, South Asia and Japan (Kennet 2004).

Litster's analysis gives us information on the occurrence of South Asian ceramics in all the investigated sites in all occupation phases and provides evidence for the homogenization of cultural behaviours in the region and the evidence of heterogeneity due to the diversity of ceramics – both hallmarks of globalization (Litster 2016).



**Figure 4. 5      Examples of Ceramic Ware Types in the Maldives**

**Credit: Mirani Litster and Michelle C. Langley**

### **4.3 Non Ceramic Material culture**

A considerable amount of non-ceramic material culture was discovered from various sites in Maldives islands through excavations and as surface finds. The assemblage consists of stone objects like sculptures, votive stupas, inscriptions, carved stones and grinding stones etc.

#### **4.3.1 Sculptures**

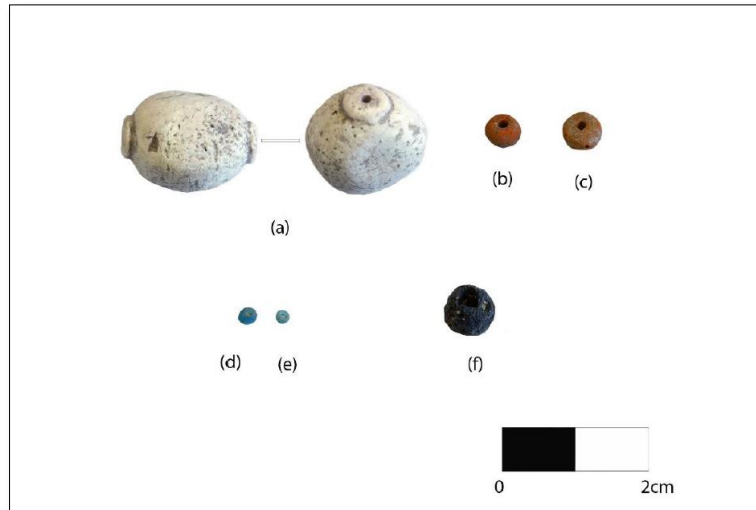
Several sculptures have been discovered throughout the geographic extent of the Maldives islands. The figures include Buddha figures, human and animal figurines. One such Buddha sculpture was discovered from Thoddu Island during the expedition by a Maldivian group under the directorship of Ismail Didi. They discovered a complete sculpture of Buddha made of coral stone which was unfortunately vandalised by the natives and only the head has survived (fig 4.6). This was displayed in National Museum, Male and was completely destroyed during a mob attack in 2012 .Another one is a relief sculpture of a seated Buddha carved out of coral stone having features of the Buddhist sculptures from Sri Lanka and South India.



**Figure 4. 6 Buddha figure from Thoddu Island**  
**Credit:NCLHR Archives , Male**

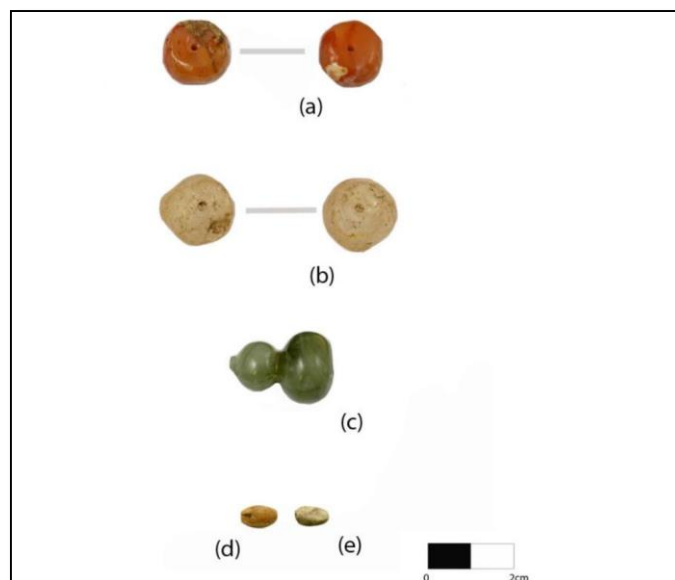
Another noteworthy discovery is of a *Buddhapada* found in Vaadhoo Island in South Huvadhoo (Gaafu Dhaalu) Atoll by the team from the National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research and the Kon-Tiki Museum in 1983-84. These are fragments of a Buddha's Footprint which constitute a coral stone slab 30"x 30" square. It is an example of the relics used for worship in early Buddhism and contains the traditional symbols.

Apart from these, various other sculptures were also discovered which included the figures of Bodhisattvas especially that of *Avalokiteswara*, several carved faces on coral stone, votive stupas, relic caskets and architectural membranes. A variety of personal adornments have been discovered from various sites in Maldives which includes, beads of different materials, metal finger rings and bracelets. Beads and small ornaments have been reported from all the sites in Maldives except the south Dhadimagi *Havitha*. Beads from Nilandhoo Foamathi, Bodu *Havitha* and Vadhoo Island were preserved in Kontiki museum, whilst those from *Kuruhinna Tharaagadu* were taken to the University of Oslo. From *Kuruhinna Tharaagadu* archaeological site, a coral bead, two terracotta beads, two glass beads and a black coral bead were discovered (Fig 4.7). The Vadhoo Island surveys resulted in the discovery of four beads made of carnelian, quartz, shell and a glass gourd shaped ornament (fig 4.8). Apart from these, a drilled *Elasmobranchii* bead was reported from Nilandhoo Foamathi and one red coral bead from Bodu *Havitha* (Litster 2016). All finger rings were discovered from *Kuruhinna Tharaagadu* in which there are made of bronze and two of silver. Archaeological excavations in *Kuruhinna Tharaagadu* and Dhadimagi *Havitha* yielded evidence of two fragments of bracelets both made of Bronze. Similar types of bracelets are displayed in British Museum ethnographic collections sourced from Maldives islands (Litster 2016).



**Figure 4.7** Beads from Kuruhinna Tharagadu Site

*Credit: Mirani Litster*



**Figure 4.8** Beads and small ornaments from Vadhoo Island surveys

**Credit: Mirani Litster**

### 4.3.2 Coins

A few coins of foreign origin were discovered from various archaeological sites in Maldives islands owing to their cultural as well as economic contact with other countries. These coins are found mainly from Relic caskets. The first one was the Roman Denarius found from Thoddoo *Havitha* in 1958 with a punch hole indicating that it might have been used as a pendant (Forbes 1984). Another coin was also discovered from a Buddhist reliquary from Gan in Haddhunmathi Atoll. This is a Byzantine coin datable to fifth and sixth centuries CE (Mohamed 2005). Similarly, from *Kuruhinna Tharagadu*, one Chinese coin which belongs to Northern Song dynasty emperor Tai Tsung datable to 990-94 CE was unearthed. The other one is from Nilandhoo as surface find and is unidentifiable (Litster 2016).

### 4.3.3 Inscriptions

Much of the research into Maldivian epigraphy and language owes its gratitude to the pioneering efforts of Wilhelm Geiger and HCP Bell. Geiger initiated research into Dhivehi language during 20<sup>th</sup> century without concrete evidence and thus led to a few erroneous theories and conclusions in his reports (Geiger 1996). Later in 1920 and 1922, HCP Bell did a more comprehensive research into Maldivian epigraphy examining several inscriptions found at different sites (Bell 1940). His efforts were hampered by the lack of material evidence to trace the scripts and language to a period earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, the period before the conversion of Maldives to Islam. Recent research has surpassed the findings of Bell and Geiger, with more documented evidence of ancient Maldivian scripts. The earliest available epigraphic record also provides information into the early Buddhist period which is an inscription discovered in Landhoo in South Miladhunmadulu Atoll (fig 4.9). The text of the inscription has a *dhāraṇī* spell, consisting of a few *mantras* of apotropaic character and combined with the *bīja* formulas typical of tantric Buddhism. It is also noticed that the language used is basically *Prakrit*, with Sanskrit occurring here and there. This appears to be a variety of a southern *Brahmi* script of the Pallava period and can be dated approximately to the sixth century CE (Gippert 2011).





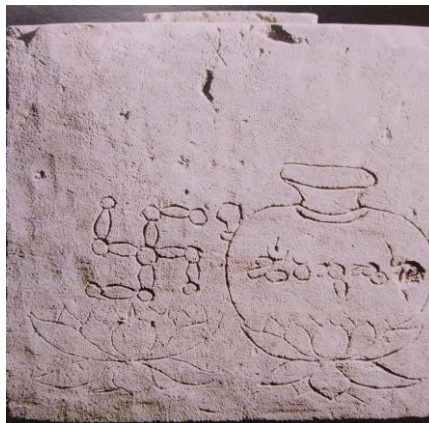
**Figure 4.9: Inscription from Landhoo Island**

In 1998, a casket made of coral stone was found in the island of Veymandoo in Thaa Atoll which contained a piece of gold leaf (fig 4.10), a good number of cowries and fine coral sand. This sheet of gold, square in shape measures 2.4x 2.4 cm with an emblem of a lotus and three fishes standing stamped to produce a low relief. An inscription can be noticed along the edges of the leaf, on the three sides of the margin. The inscription read as *Maha Machchiha namo Bhagavato Radasya Matima* which is translated as Obesience to the great/ sacred fish, Venerable King's resting place. Paleographically the script is similar to *Grantha* and is dated to 10th -11<sup>th</sup> century CE (Mohamed *et al.* 2005).



**Figure 4.10: Inscription on a Gold leaf from Veymandhoo Island**

A coral stone relic casket with engraved pictures and legends on all four sides was discovered from Nilandhoo Island of Faafu in 1984. One side of the casket shows *swastika* – symbol for hail on a lotus and a pot on another lotus. The legend is represented inside the pot. The legend reads as *Om Rasu Svaha*, which means Hail the King (fig 4.11.1).



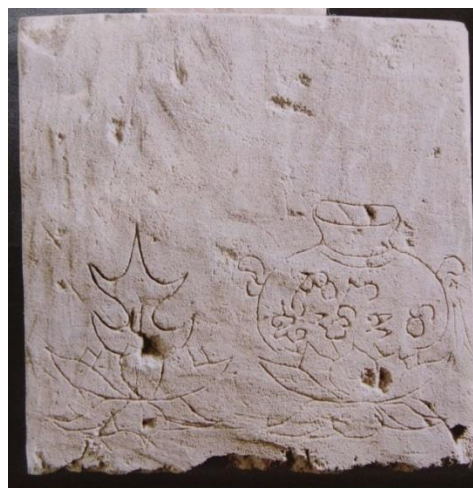
**Figure 4.11.1 First side of the coral stone casket showing legend.**

The second side shows three fishes hopping diagonally to the right on a lotus. To the right a closed pot is engraved with legends on its body portion. The legend in two lines reads as '*Ye Svaha Om Rasu Sri*', which may be translated as 'Hail to the path of *Om*, the king's prosperity' (fig 4.11.2).



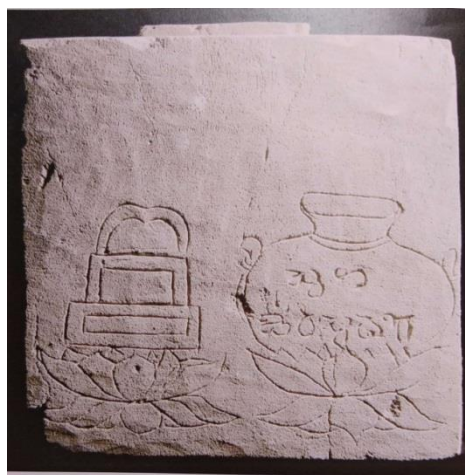
**Figure 4.11.2 Second side of the coral casket showing legend.**

The third side is characterised with the stylised version of a seated figure (*Sri*) on the lotus. To their right is a closed pot on a lotus. The legend in two lines can be seen on the body of the pot. The legend reads as '*Svaha Om Sri Aira*' which means 'Hail to the prosperous Goddess of all that is noble' (fig 4.11.3).



**Figure 4.11.3 Third side of the casket showing legend.**

The fourth side is engraved with a three storeyed miniature stupa on a lotus. To its right is a pot on a lotus. The legend in two lines is seen on the body portion of the pot (fig 4.11.4). The legend reads as '*Svaha Om Rasu Thalu*' which means 'Hail to the King's memorial monument'. Studies suggests that the legends shows affinity towards the Maldivian alphabet *Evyela Akuru* and are written in mixed script similar to that of Kannada, Telugu, Grantha, Tamil and Sinhala alphabets and dated to 10-11 century CE (Mohamed *et al.* 2005).



**Figure 4.11.4 Fourth side of the casket showing legend**

The aim of this chapter was to present a cultural sequence of Maldives islands and its supplementary evidence, in order to contextualize this research, and also to identify major phases of change. It is obvious that most of the evidence for interaction is based on structural remains, material culture, which is attributed to particular types, or classes, based on style corroborated with the radiocarbon dates. The presence of the early *Prakrit* inscription within the core area suggests that the urban communities in the area adopted a developed script. Buddhism flourished in the area both as a novel intellectual tradition. The appearance of the Red Polished Ware pottery and Sassanian Glazed Ware suggest an assimilation of a new cultural group into the islands. The occurrence of the new cultural traits such as Buddhism and the *Brahmi* script has pointed out that the migrant group was associated to the South Indian region. The existence of the Red Polished Ware unambiguously shows the cultural contacts with western India engaged during the urban phase. Thus, from the available archaeological evidence mentioned above, Maldives have been occupied from at least the third century CE with the first evidence for Buddhism in the islands and the archaeological repertoire highlights that Buddhism in Maldives islands was profoundly influenced by Sri Lankan and Indian practices.