



## A History of Maldivian Architecture: Part 1—Medieval records to 1900.



Most animals are builders for the birds build nests and the bees build hives. What probably differentiates humans from other animals is that humans go beyond the functional requirements of shelters to create works of art. But architecture as art is bounded by both environmental conditions and the resources and technology available in a given space and time. In this manner, architecture in the Maldives takes account of the islands' climate, the meager resources available and the islands' close relationship to the sea (virtually no point in the Maldives is more than 500 metres away from the sea or two metres above the water table). Buildings, therefore, made extensive use of indigenous material. Architectural principles and practices were green and sustainable. In fact, until about 1800, almost all the buildings were made from what is available, coral stone and plant material.

In this, the first of five short articles on Maldivian architecture, I intend to present the observations of visitors to the Maldives. There are few, if any, surviving documents on architecture in the Maldives from the medieval period. In fact, most of what we know about the architecture of the period is from accounts of visitors to the Maldives. This is due to a number of reasons, one of which is the lack of need to write this information on paper for preservation; the need does not exist due to the small size of population. Large populations lead to specialization and greater learning in all spheres of life. Except for ecclesiastic documents, the writing material was a type of palm leaf which tends to disintegrate in the humid climate of the Maldives in about a life time.

The earliest reference to the architecture of the Maldives is in Edrisi [1099 – 1186 CE] who had compiled from previous authorities and from others an account of the Maldives. The account appears in *Geographie d' Edrisi [par PA Joubert, 2 vols., Paris, 1836]*; a translation of the relevant text by Albert Gray is in Volume 2 Part 2 of *The Voyage of Francois Pyrrard of Laval* published by the Haklyut Society in 1890 (page 432)].

“The islands known by the name *El Roibahat [Dibajat]* are peopled. They cultivate there the coco-tree and the sugar-cane. Commerce is carried on by means of shells. They are distant from one another about six miles. Their king preserves these shells in his treasury, and he possesses the greater portion of them. The inhabitants are industrious, adroit, and intelligent. They manufacture wide tunics, open at the neck and supplied with pockets. They build ships with very slender timber. Their houses and other important buildings are of very durable stone, but they also employ, in the construction of their dwellings, timber which comes over sea, and also scented woods. They say that the

From the above we understand that dwellings were then built from stones. However, Edrisi is not known to have visited the Maldives. The earliest reference to the architecture of the Maldives by a visitor is by the well-known Muslim traveller, Ibn Battuta who lived in the Maldives for one and a half years from early 1343 until 24<sup>th</sup> August 1344. In his travelogue, there are two references to the Maldives' architecture which were brief, but nevertheless descriptive. The first occurrence is on page 199.

(Source: Hussain, M. (1976). *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta (India, Maldive Is*

From the above single statement one may make three points: the mosques are relatively beautiful and that dwellings are made mostly of wood. The statement also indicates that other materials were used to make buildings. Certainly, coral stone, found in abundance in the lagoons are used as a building material. Whether any metal was used is not known. The other reference to architecture by Ibn Battuta is on page 200. He notes:

Their buildings are made of wood, and they arrange the floors of their houses high above the ground as a protection against damp, since the earth in their country is moist. The process of construction with them is as follows: they fashion blocks of stone two or three cubits long, place them in rows one above the other and lay upon them beams of coco-nut-wood. Thereupon they raise walls of wood—an art in which they are wonderfully skilled. And they build in the portico of the house a chamber called *mālam*, in which the house-owner sits with his friends. It has two doors, through one of which facing the portico enter the visitors; while through the other at the side of the house enters the owner. Near this chamber there is a large vessel full of water which has a bowl called *valanj*, which is made of the coco-nut shell. It has a handle two cubits long with which one can draw water from the wells since the water is near.

Almost all the inhabitants, high as well as low, walk barefooted and their streets, swept clean, are shaded by trees so that the walker feels he is in a garden. Despite all this every one entering a house must wash his feet with the water to be found in the large vessel at the *mālam*, and dry them on a thick mat of palm fibres, which lies there and then he enters the house. In the same manner acts every one who enters a mosque.

However, the translation above seems to be slightly different from Albert Gray's translation of the relevant passage of Ibn Battuta. His translation (op. cit, page 411–412) is as follows:

“Their buildings are of wood,<sup>3</sup> and they take care to raise the floor of their houses some height above the ground, by way of precaution against damp, owing to the humidity of the soil. This is the method they adopt: they dress the stones, each of which is of two or three cubits long, and place them in piles; across these they lay beams of the coco-tree, and afterwards raise the walls with boards. In this work they show marvellous skill. In the vestibule of the house they construct an apartment which they call *mālam*,<sup>4</sup> and there the master of the house sits with his friends.

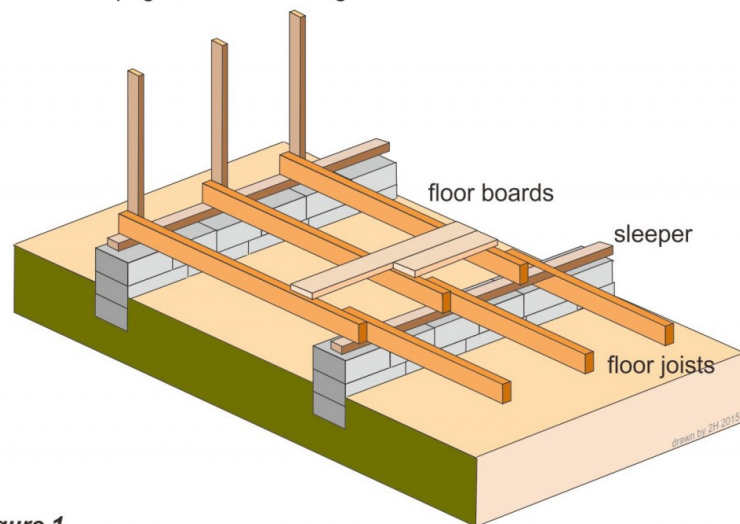
This room has two doors, one opening on the vestibule, by which strangers are introduced, the other on the side of the house by which the owner enters. Near the room in question is a jar full of water, a bowl called *walendj*,<sup>1</sup> made of the coconut-shell. It has a handle of [only] two cubits, wherewith to draw the water from the wells, by reason of their little depth.

“All the inhabitants of the Maldives, be they nobles or the common folk, keep their feet bare. The streets are swept and well kept; they are shaded by trees, and the passenger walks as it were in an orchard. Albeit every person who enters a house is obliged to wash his feet with water from the jar placed near the *mdlam*, and rub them with a coarse fabric of *lif*<sup>2</sup> placed there, after which he enters the house. Every person entering a mosque does the same. It is a custom of the natives when a vessel arrives

The above passage from Ibn Battuta gives us more information about the nature of buildings in the fourteenth century:

- The houses were built on rows of low coral stone walls three to four and half feet long above the ground for protection from damp.
- Coconut palm beams (joists of *vakaru*) span the rows of coral stone foundation walls to which flooring boards must have been fixed. The walls above the floor were built out of wood.
- In terms of layout of homes, there is a *maalam* (nowadays translated as hall). The front portico or vestibule was a covered space leading to the main house. There are two entry ways to the portico, one at front possibly facing the street and the other on the side.

uprights to roof framing



**Figure 1**

Framing as suggested by Ibn Battuta.

However, this type of framing is not in use by 1800, according to Albert Gray.

By 1900, the practice of raising floors had all but disappeared except in a few dwellings. The photograph below was taken in 1901. The house has a raised floor. Dr Abdulla Waheed who lived in Bodufenuvalhige (a residence in Male', the capital island, where he lives in late 1960s) informed me that the *namaadhuge* (prayer hut) in this house and in his family home in Meedhoo in Addu Atoll had raised floors, about one and half feet above the ground.



The environment of the Maldives provides only coral stone as the hardest material for building. Coral stone tends to crumble in time and is less durable than igneous rocks and is softer than even sandstone. This weak building material together with the climate and the salty environment make for buildings that do not survive the ravages of time. This issue is further compounded by the fact that the Maldives have very little land, 298 square kilometres being the total land area; old buildings had been and continue to be demolished to make space for new buildings. Thus there are almost no extant buildings from the medieval period.

An important architectural feature of Fuvahmulah, an island in the South of the Maldives, was described by two French brothers, Jean and Raoul Parmentier who travelled by way of the the Maldives in 1529. Some men from one of the ships landed in Fuvahmulah on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1529. The chronicler of the voyage described an architectural feature of Fuvahmulah in the following manner (The account of the travel is from an edition of Bulletin of the Society Normane de Geographie for 1883 edited by M. Schefer, Paris, 1883 translated by Albert Gray in the volume previously cited, page 488).

“In this island was a temple or mosque, a very ancient structure, composed of massive stone. The captain desired to see the inside as well as the outside, whereupon the chief priest bade them open it and entered within. The work pleased him greatly, and chiefly a woodwork screen, of ancient mouldings, the best he had ever seen, with a balustrade so neatly turned that our ship’s carpenter was surprised to see the fineness of the work. The temple had galleries all around, and at the end a secret enclosure shut off by a wooden screen, like a *Sanctum Sanctorum*. The captain bade them open it, to see what was within, and whether there were any idols there, but he perceived nothing but a lamp formed of the coconut. The roof or vault of this temple was round in form, with a wainscoted ceiling covered with ancient painting. Hard by the temple was a *piscina*, or lavatory, flat bottomed, and paved with a black stone like marble, finely cut with ancient mouldings, and having all the appearance of massive workmanship. In another place, a little apart, was a kind of square well or fountain, six or eight feet deep, having within it a number of poles, each with a gourd at the end, where-with the natives drew their water. This well also was flat bottomed, and paved with the same stone as the lavatory. In this island were many other similar fountains or wells, and also many small chapels and oratories in the same style as the great temple.<sup>1</sup>

The chronicler notes, immediately after the above that the “the dwellings are small and miserably built.”

On 16<sup>th</sup> February 1922, a team of archaeologists headed by HCP Bell visited Fuahmulah, and took photographs architectural and archaeological sites. There was an old Hukuru Miskiiy (Friday Mosque) but he did not report seeing any temple structure with a round roof with a wainscoted ceiling covered in painting. It was most likely that what was reported above was a stupa which has by then had taken its toll of time. Bell was able to identify many features of a Havittha or stupa among the ruins. The mound of ruins was about 25 feet high (Bell, H.C.P. (1940). *The Maldives Islands*. Colombo: Ceylon Government Press).

The next external account of the Maldivian architecture was given by the Frenchman Francois Pyrard who got shipwrecked in July 1602 in the Maldives. He was able to leave only in February 1607 (after about four years). After returning to France he wrote a comprehensive description of the Maldives and her customs. A translation from the French into English was made by Albert Gray, assisted by HCP Bell who had visited the Maldives thrice. Both translators worked in the Ceylon Civil Service. Pyrard makes the following points about architecture (*The Voyage of Francois Pyrard of Laval*, Volume 1, London: The Haklyut Society, 1887, p. 118 —119)

The houses and buildings of the common folk are of coco-wood, cut from the trunks of the trees; they are thatched with the leaves for the same tree, plaited together double. The nobles and the rich build houses of stone, raised from the shallows of the sea, where they get as much as they want, both as to length and thickness<sup>1</sup>. It is polished, and of good grain, very white, but a little hard in some cases for cutting and working; in time it loses its natural hardness and whiteness, and at length becomes quite black, after being beaten with rain or soaked in fresh water. The manner of drawing up this stone from the sea is remarkable.

In a footnote to the above passage (referenced as 1 above), the writer adds what he had read from earlier publications, most notably:

The general use of stone has not been maintained. Mr. Bell, in 1879, found only one house built of it at Male, besides the Sultan's. The dwellings of the well-to-do natives are now of wood; those of the poor of coco-thatch, or wattle and daub, with thatched roofs, resembling the 'lines' of Tamil coolies (Report, 56). Pyrard may be going too far in saying that the houses of the nobles were built of stone; if this were so, some of them would probably be standing still. Ibn Batuta states that stone was used in his time for the foundations, and the Indian surveyors of 1835 found only the ruins of a few houses built of madrepora. The following account is still true: 'Their houses are ill-built and dark, having at most only one small window, and frequently none at all; in fact, they are but large-sized huts with a peaked roof, in general about 28 feet long by 12 broad, and 15 feet high to the top of the roof. They are made of a substantial frame-work of wood, thatched all over with coco-nut leaves; the floor is plastered, and the sides are sometimes boarded; a partition near the middle divides the house into two rooms, one of which is private and the other open to visitors. In this public room there are two ranges of seats; the one on the right side on entering is considered the most honourable, and the other on the left (carried across the house) is appropriated for the common people" (Chr., in *T. B. G. S.*, i, 59). Mr. Bell supplies the Maldivian names for this description. The inner or private room is the *eteri-ge* or *maval-ge*; the outer, or public room, is *beru-ge*; the range of seats on the right is *kuda-arhi*; the other is *bedu-*

*arhi* (Report, 56). [T.B.G.S: Transactions of Bombay Geographical Society]

A commentary on the above is necessary. There is no living record of anyone using wattle and daub for covering the sides of a house. In fact, the loose sandy soil mostly found in the Maldives is certainly unsuitable for the task. However, sandy soil mixed with slaked lime forms a reasonably strong mortar (lime mortar—a building material dating back to 4th century BC). In living memory, composite walls are built with crushed coral stone or madrepora held together with lime mortar. In rare instances hard wood may be buried in the wall for strength. An admixture of sugary syrup from the coconut palm is used when additional strength was required. The Indian surveyors' descriptions begin comment as well. Generally, three types of houses may be noted, characterized by the standing of the owner: the working class, the professional or skilled class and the aristocrats. The large huts noted above probably referred to the first homes of new couples, immigrants from other islands or the very poor. Houses are described in a latter part of this series of articles.

In the next part, traditional measures are described. Measures regulate and constrain form, space and order in buildings.

---

## 4 Comments

---



**Mohamed.H** March 24, 2017 at 6:22 am - [Reply](#)

Very interesting. In your research did you come over any survived very old residential building that is built as explained?

---



**hassan.hameed@hotmail.com** March 24, 2017 at 7:43 am - [Reply](#)

Yes, there are several residential buildings like that. One popular example is Esjehige in Male'. There are several even in small islands. Because of the small size of land, old homes are being demolished to build new ones so a photographic record of these homes are essential for those interested in architecture.

---



**Naash** May 20, 2017 at 1:19 pm - [Reply](#)

Thanks this helped me a lot with my school work I appreciate all ur work to find this information

---



**Zakwaan** January 4, 2018 at 10:26 pm - [Reply](#)

Jazakallahu khairan for compiling this information from various sources. This information has helped me learn more about our past

---

---

## Leave A Comment

---