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

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Cowrie—an Early Global Commodity: An Archaeological Research on the Islamic Period of the Maldivian Islands

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Cowrie shells, most importantly *Cypraea Moneta*, played a pivotal role and were a valuable commodity during the early global trade and exchange that took place around the world. They were used as a currency in many parts of the world and were exchanged for various kinds of goods as well as African slaves. According to several historical sources, it has often been suggested that the Maldives were the main exporter of these shells. The use of cowries in the trade links along the Indian Ocean trade network as well as the production and importance were mentioned by several authors from the ninth century onwards; however, this had never been tested archaeologically. Thus in December 2014, 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 from 1150 to 1900.

This paper will briefly report on the archaeological fieldwork undertaken in early 2016 in the Maldives, which involved test excavations at three sites (Ha. Utheemu, K. Male' and M. Veyvah). Broader surveys were also conducted mainly in Raa Atoll, which will not be discussed in this paper. The field team consisted of the Principal Investigator Prof. Anne Haour, Post-Doctoral Researcher Dr. Annalisa Christie, 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.

The first site excavated was the island of Utheemu in Haa Alifu Atoll. Utheemu is a rather important island in the country's history, and reports of the discovery of a cowrie hoard along with various artefacts (including pottery and glass) apparently indicative of medieval trade had been received from the island. Five test pits were dug in four different areas of the island, including two units inside the Utheemu Palace. The other three units were placed within the current football field, a mound behind the palace and within a field nearby that had been marked as a tourism zone on the island. Test-pit methods and sizes differed per unit according to the nature and occurrence of the site within the area. Of the five units excavated, the palace and the tourism

zone trenches were the most productive. Finds included several sherds of pottery, glass (including bracelets) and metal fragments, charcoal, shells (including cowries), faunal remains (mostly fish bones), coral stone blocks as well as a female grave in one unit of the palace and one bead.

Male' was the next site to be excavated—this had been historically, as well as today, the capital island of the Maldives. The Sultan's Park where the former palace once stood was selected for excavations since it is one of the only remaining open spaces in Male', being one of the world's most densely populated islands with few prospects for a study of undisturbed remains. This park consists of the only surviving building of the former palace structures (*Usgekolhu*) and eight shovel-test pits were established within the empty area in front of the building. The finds were similar to Utheemu with the exception of human bones and beads. There was less pottery than at Utheemu, but more cowries.

The island of Veyvah in Meemu atoll was the final site for excavation and was selected due to the presence of an ancient coral stone mosque (about 400 years old) on the island, and also because it offered good prospects for a study of undisturbed levels. Due to most of the open spaces being used for habitation, excavations were targeted within the agricultural fields around the island. Five units were excavated in different areas, of which three units provided promising results. The finds from this island were also similar to those discovered at Utheemu and Male', again with the exception of human bones and less pottery. One bead was also discovered on this island.

To sum up, this is an ongoing project and the findings and results of the first season are currently being studied. The second season of fieldwork will take place next year. At this point, the author would like to thank the project team at the University of East Anglia, United Kingdom; Department of Heritage, Maldives National Museum, Academy of Dhivehi Language, Boduthakurufaanu Memorial Center and all the atoll and island councils in the Maldives for their continuous support for this project.



Fig 1: Female grave found in trench 5 in Ha. Utheemu (Jaufar 2016)



Fig 3: Excavations at K. Male' (Haour 2016)



Fig 2: Unit 3 in Ha. Utheemu (Haour 2016)



Fig 4: Pot sherd from the excavations (Jaufar 2016)



Fig 5: Excavations at M. Veyvah (Haour 2016)



The team: Prof. Anne Haour, Shiura Jaufar and Dr. Annalisa Christie (from left to right)