

7 Maldives, The Cowrie Island : from the Indian Perspective

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The present name Maldives originates from the term *Mala-dvipa*, wherein mala denotes both money and load. In Bengali language *mala-kori* or *mala-kauri* and *taka-kori* (wherein kori stands for cowrie shells) are terms that still imply money even after the cowries have long lost their status as money in Bengal.¹ *Dvipa* is the term for island in Sanskrit and *diva* is the Prakrit term for the same (*dvipa*>*dipa*>*diva*). Therefore, *Mala-diva* which indicates 'island of cowries' probably has a Prakrit origin. Though we do not get this term in early literature to indicate the name of these islands, it is interesting to note that Alberuni mentioned Maldives as *Diwa kawdah*, i.e. *Dvipa Kavadda*.² Also a Prakrit term, *kavadda* comes from Sanskrit *kapardaka* (*kaparda*>*kavadra*>*kavadda*). Basu Majumdar and Chatterjee have mentioned about two epigraphic records that mention Kapardakadvipa or the cowrie islands which is definitely a reference to Maldives islands.³ What is surprising is that the island which was named after this commodity i.e. cowrie called these shells as 'boli'. It was in use in the 17th century as Pyrard of Laval mentions that the Maldivians call these shells as boli.⁴ However, the term was not adopted by the Indian users of these shells who named the islands initially as *Kavadda Dvipa* and later as *Mala-dvipa*. In the 9th century CE the term denoting cowries was *Kastaj Kabtaj* as is indicated by the account *Ahbarash Shinwa l- Hind*, written in 851 CE, mentioning that in the Maldives islands, the shells are called 'Kastaj' by the natives.⁵ But this word has not survived in modern Maldivian language. The islands and its various names by which it was designated in the past shows its engagement with several powers with whom it interacted. These small islands in the Indian Ocean were home of the cowries especially the two which gained the status of universal currency in a broader space-transcending boundaries of chiefdoms, kingdoms and states. These tiny lustrous gastropods were one of the earliest forms of currency to gain an international status and acceptance as commodity money.

Maldives became the largest supplier of two types of cowries which were accepted as money though there were other varieties of cowries which were also used as money but these two became the most popular form of acceptable currency in a larger network: the *Cypraeamoneta* and *Cypraea annulus*. There are more than 200 varieties of cowrie shells.⁶ The reason for large scale use of these two varieties is probably due to two factors, firstly that *Cypraeamoneta* and *Cypraea annulus* often occur together hence segregating them was a difficult task or using them together was easier. Secondly, they were available easily within accessible fishing zone at Maldives. As early sources mention their fishing by women who stood in the waters up to their waist and used coconut leaves to catch these gastropods which climbed on these leaves. Besides Maldives a major concentration of *Cypraeamoneta* exists in the Sulu islands, located to the southwest of the Philippine Islands.

The Indian subcontinent also has cowrie shells especially in the peninsular south, hence south India

never used them as currency. The easy availability did not allow them to accept this commodity money for regular use. Bengal and Odisha became as the largest users of these cowrie shells as money. A dual system of monetization existed in these regions as they adopted commodity money along with metallic currency.⁷ These cowrie shells were imported from Maldives and it was a very tedious and difficult process of procurement yet they opted to adopt these as a medium of exchange especially as small change or as a currency of the masses. The journey from Bengal to Maldives and back would not have been an easy one. Not only did it involve risk but also a large investment in the shipping activity.

Bin Yang's researches reveal that cowrie shells emerged as a universal currency in a larger trade network.⁸ This was also one of the reasons for the involvement of Bengal in bringing these shells from Maldives. Bengal supplied rice and in lieu it imported cowrie shells in large quantities. But the journey from Bengal to Maldives would have been driven by stronger reasons and not only to procure its own currency. Basu Majumdar and Chatterjee state that Bengal emerged as an intermediary in the cowrie trade and became the largest supplier of cowrie shells to Yunnan and probably also China.⁹ Faxian in 5th century CE mentions in his account, that cowries were accepted as currency in the whole of *Madhyadesh*. Bengal, Bihar and Odisha accepted it as regular currency and the other regions were Yunnan, China, Arakan (Raqa) and in Martaban (Martamane)¹⁰ which were using cowries as their official currency.

Bengal opted for cowrie shells as medium of exchange for several reasons the most important being lack of available resources especially gold and silver, for minting metal money and secondly the heavy debasement of coinage which it had witnessed in the post Gupta era¹¹ made cowrie a better option as it did not involve the hassles of minting and replicating it or forging them was not possible. The third reason probably was its connection with Maldives, which would have been initially as an intermediary in the shipment of cowries for China and Yunnan but later its acceptability as a universal currency would have inspired this region to adopt it as a regular currency. Thus there existed a network which may be termed as a *Cowrie network*. Bengal or the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere was a very important region in this *Cowrie network*.

Bengal's coastal position in the Bay of Bengal network became the major reason for its involvement in the cowrie trade.¹² The journey to Maldives was long and risky and logistics would also have been a major issue in adopting cowries as a regular currency. What can be assumed is that from Maldives they were brought in large ships. Cowries were both main commodity and ballast for these ships. As suggested by James Heimann, the ships from Bengal would have used rice as ballast and on their return journey,¹³ they would have used cowries as the same. These ships would have anchored in the high sea as the delta in Bengal would not have allowed these ships to ply to the harbour. Probably small local boats were used to bring the cowries to the shore. Riverine network was used for transporting them to far-off places in Bengal and Bihar using boats as mode of transport. This brings us to the question of logistics i.e. where were these shells stored? As the quantity was a big issue. Large store houses were required to store them, these store houses would definitely have been state-owned storage units as their security and proper logistics would be the major issue that the kings and administration had to deal with. Besides acquiring and storing them another imperative step was the conversion of these imported commodity into money which beyond doubt was a state concern and prerogative. In fixing the relative value of this commodity money *vis-à-vis* metal money. The evaluation and final fixation of rates would have depended on their real cost when they were acquired in Maldives as commodity, i.e. cost in terms of its exchange with rice or any other

commodity, along with this the cost of shipment, ferrying cost using small local boats, labour charges, logistics etc. would also have been taken into account for fixation of the rate of cowrie vis-a vis metal coinage. In this context it is worth mentioning that none of the accounts ever mention any cowrie store house. The earliest reference to cowrie storage comes from Pyrdard of Laval who mentions that in Bengal, Kings and great fief-holders have had houses built exclusively to store cowrie shells, treating these as part of their treasure.

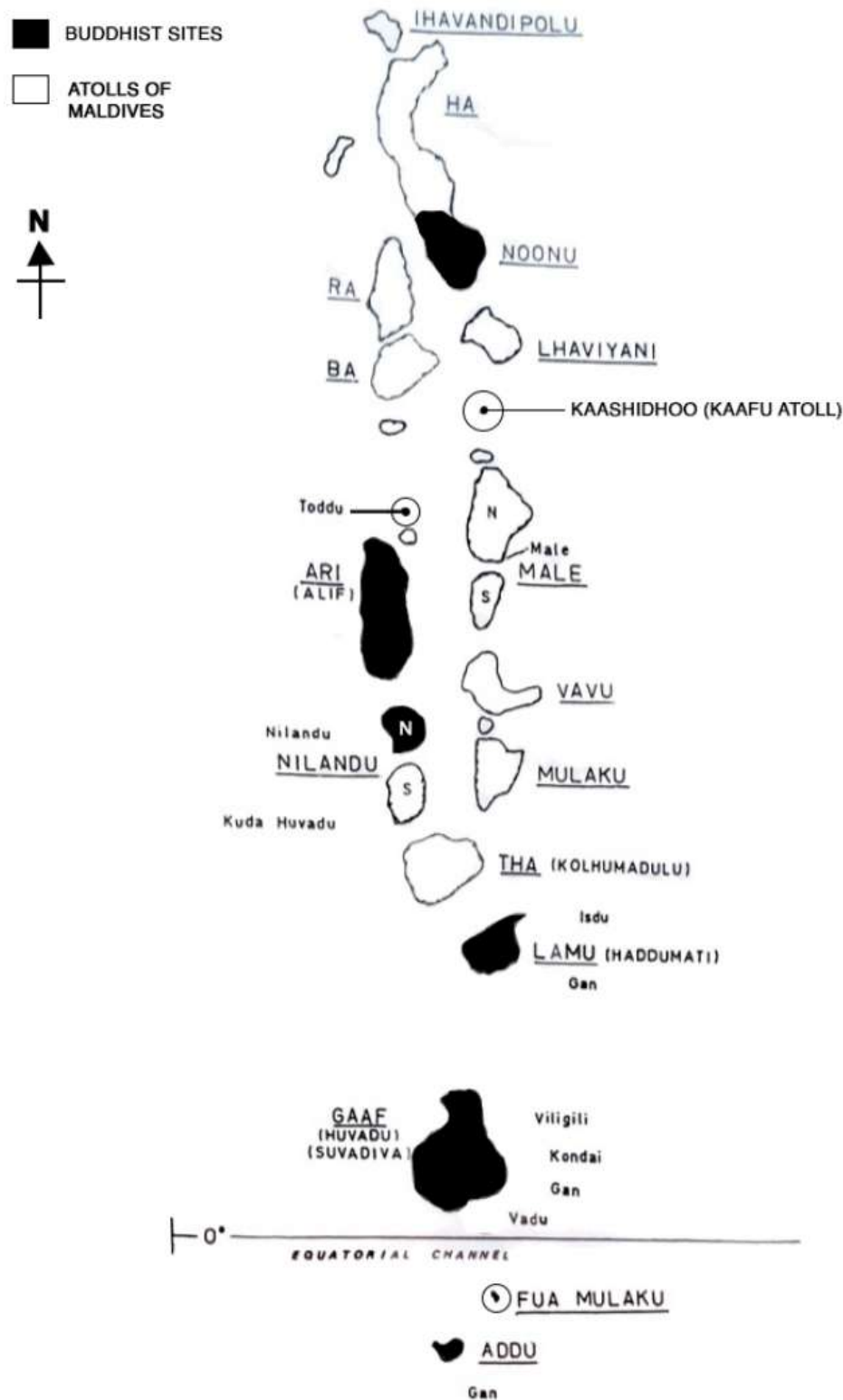


Fig.7.1 : Map of Maldives showing Buddhist sites in Maldives

At this juncture we would like to explore the sites in Maldives and the archaeological finds, See Map Fig.7.1. The island of Kaashidhoo which is located in the North Male or Kafu atoll in Maldives has yielded Buddhist remains, Fig.7.2. The excavation report of Kashidhoo suggests that Buddhism made a major impact on this island in the first part of the first millennium CE. Several miniature Buddhist votive stupas have been found here, Fig.7.3, and there are evidences of Buddhist monasteries of the same period. A 16-sided stupa-like structure and multiple votive stupa remains have been located at the Buddhist site of Kaashidhoo in Maldives, Fig.7.4. Along with the Buddhist monasteries the site has also yielded ruined structures and some graves. It is worth mentioning that this site has yielded the evidence of many pits and deposits containing cowrie shells, Fig.7.5a. One such find is worth mentioning which has more than 62000 cowries, Fig.7.5b. Cowrie shells probably never functioned as money in Maldives due to their abundance and easy availability. Since they were export items, collection and export of cowrie shells would have been a royal prerogative. There would have been a strict control on them. The finding of such cowries in and near the graves, indicates their ritualistic usage, Fig.7.6. In this context it is worth mentioning that many Buddhist relic caskets have cowrie shell as a grave goods or as money for the last journey of the departed soul. Here in Maldives as well, the present authors would like to assume a Buddhist ritualistic connection with these shells which have been reported from the monastic complexes. To make this argument further stronger we would like to state that a deposit box, probably a relic container, containing the collection of cowrie shells has also been found from the Buddhist monastery from the island of Malhos in Baa atoll. Another evidence comes from the Veymandhoo in the Thaa atoll yielding 63 cowrie shells. The shell has been radio carbon dated to AD 690-785. A small bronze Buddha has also been found from the island of Gaddho in the Laamu Atoll, Fig.7.7. Thus, the Buddhist connection with these cowrie shells becomes a well established fact. Not only in Maldives but such relic caskets have been reported from Vaishali in Bihar, Manikiyala and many more sites in the northwest India. What is interesting is a similar find from Europe. Such cowrie shells were reported from the four graves of Northern Norway, north of Arctic Circle dated to 7th century CE. There is another find from the island of Helgo, Central Europe, here among other finds, is a bronze statue of Buddha, dated 6th century CE, which was brought from Kashmir, Fig.7.8.

Numerous Buddhist artefacts and remains attest the popularity of Buddhism in Maldives for more than a thousand years. H.C.P. Bell who was familiar with the archaeology of Sri Lanka connected these early Buddhist evidences with their Sinhalese counterparts. Bell visited twelve islands in the Southern Maldives and reported Buddhist monasteries on four of these. Clarence Maloney, an anthropologist also mentions cultural affinities with the Sinhalese. Prior to the Buddhist impact, he assumes that Brahmanical culture was prevalent in the Maldives, mainly on the basis of linguistic traits.¹⁴

Kaashidhoo yielded significant Buddhist remains and it was probably a port of call for ships journeying to the East through the Maldives. Among the objects found here are pottery shards originating probably in India and Sri Lanka. This region has also yielded stoneware, and Chinese-ware which are mostly grey and light green bowls. The origin of many of these items dating from the 9th century onwards is Southern China.¹⁵ As Maldives has no clay, all cooking utensils, storage jars and other such objects were brought to the islands from abroad, often by local sailing craft travelling on trading missions to countries of the region, mainly to India and undivided Bengal.



Fig. 7.2 : Site of KuruhinnaTharaaganduKaashidhoo (Source: e source: Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuruhinna_Tharaagandu)



Fig. 7.3 : Two miniature votive stupa, Kaashidhoo, ruins 31 and 32



Fig.7.4 : A 16-sided stupa-like structure and multiple votive stupa remains, Kaashidhoo, Maldives, Courtesy: Egil Mikkelsen

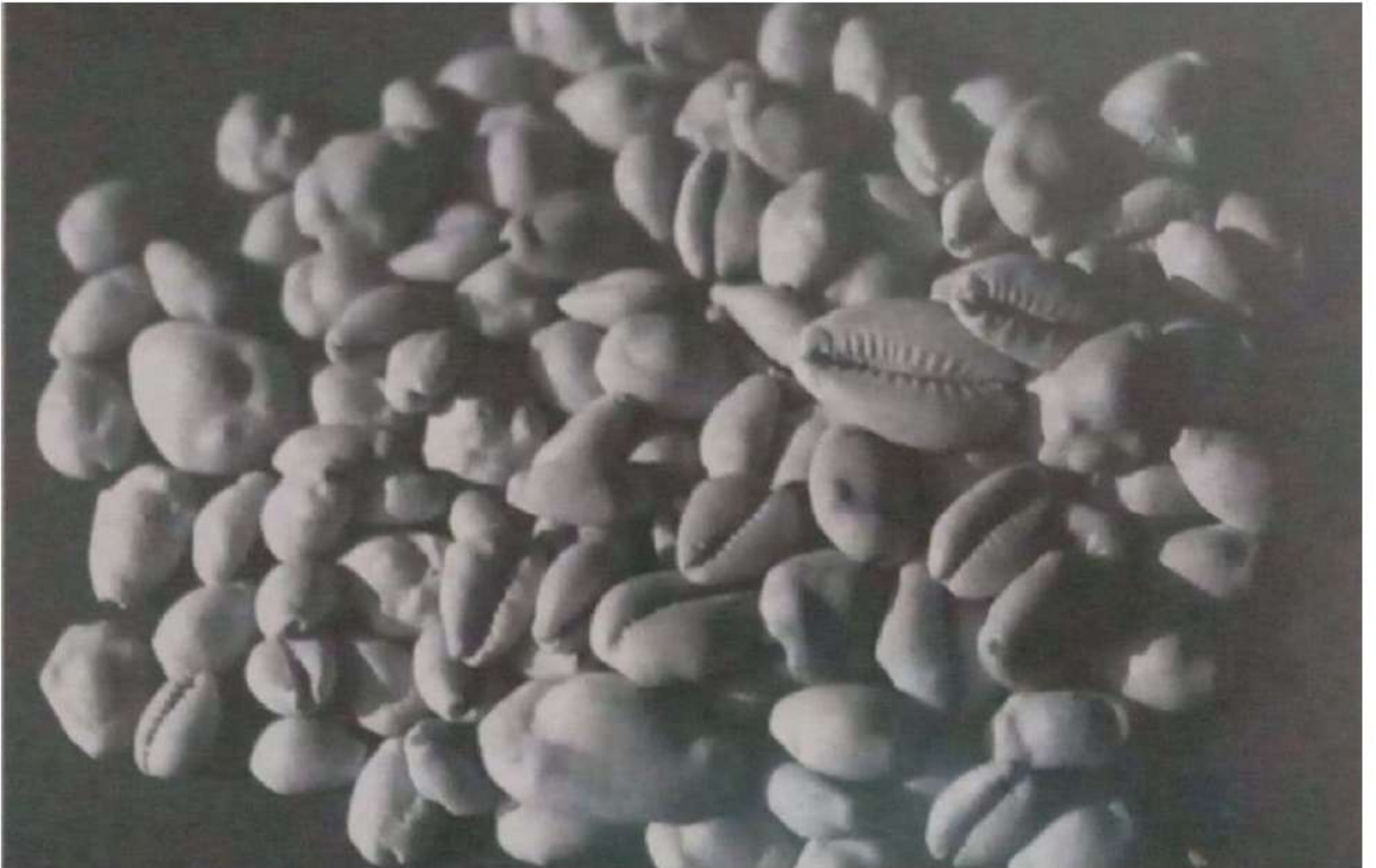


Fig.7.5a : Cowrie shell deposits unearthed from Kaashidhoo, Courtesy: Egil Mikkelsen



Fig.5b : More than 62000 Cowrie Shells found from ruin II in Kaashidhoo, Maldives, Courtesy: Egil Mikkelsen



Fig.7.6 : Late Buddhist grave, Kaashidhoo

Buddhist ruins from Maldives

The excavations at Toddu/ Thoddo island, now known as the Thoddo dagaba has yielded a circular stone structure with a circumference of 16 meters, rising in a characteristic bell-shaped dome to a height of more than two meters which has been identified as a stupa, Fig.7.9. Two coins have been reported from the relic casket; one of these being a Roman Republican coin. Discovery of this coin in the stupa premises in a relic casket is very significant. A well-preserved statue of the Buddha was discovered, which had apparently been carefully concealed in a hidden chamber beneath a large stone slab. Ismail Didi in his report refers to this relic-casket, which he designates *kurandi*, a type of indigenous pot.¹⁶ The items recovered from the relic casket are a round silver box, around which there was a black powder-like substance which may have been the ashes, two silver plates or seals, some two inches long by one inch broad, three rings. On the silver plates there was a stamp which is effaced. There were tiny fragments of some golden substance and pieces of gold wire; also, a substance like native medicine, *huisum* flower.

Archaeological excavation carried out by Thor expeditions in 1983 revealed monastery sites with many Buddhist elements from different islands of Maldives atolls.¹⁷ *Havitta* is the term used by Maldivians for these temple mounds. Isdu Island of Haddumati or Laamu Atoll contains a dome-like *havitta* which according to Mr. Loutfi is the largest now standing in the Maldives. Another island called Gan from the same atoll which was also investigated by Bell previously had once the elegant temple with a seven-tier pinnacle on top. This stupa structure is designated as *Hat-teli Dagaba* by natives. Bell uncovered a huge face of a colossal Buddha from this *havitta*. This Hat-teli Dagaba had been recognized by Bell as a stupa of an archaic Sri Lankan type. Another small image of a seated Buddha was unveiled in lower strata. Another excavation conducted in 1983 on the mound known as Bodu Havitta or Vadamaga Havitta. During this excavation some stone fragments were unearthed while clearing the stone-built wall of eastern side of the southern wall. A specimen of a rounded cylindrical shape was interesting one. The material of this specimen is topaz which is not found in Maldives. Some fragmentary stone pieces with dentilated ornamentation with rounded ridge and hanging arches in high relief at the bottom were also recovered. The significance of these items from the excavation is that the arch-shaped proliferations resemble *chaitya* arch. Another worth mentioning feature is, in some stone blocks there is a circular ornamentation which is a representation of wheel and the lotus flower, having a manifest Buddhist context. Similar decorative elements with simple concentric circles furnished with a trisected, band-like decoration on either side may be noticed in several ornamental compositions on the Amaravati stupa, India; however, in most cases the circle of Gan slab are replaced by lotus flowers.¹⁸ The panel showing similar features in Amaravati stupa is dated to 2nd century CE. During the excavation of 1984 in the same site, several items of Buddhist significance were recovered like the one with a primitive but well-preserved lion figure in stone, another interesting element of Buddhist art. From the district of Kuruhinna of the same island stupa referred as Mumbaru Stupa reported by Bell, which contained the decorative elements of classical dentilated ornament triglyph and metope. The feature shown in this stupa structure had no direct parallel either in Sri Lanka or in India. From Vadu island of Gaaf Atoll was found an interesting stone slab with Buddha's footprints decorated with many pictograms and symbols, Fig.7.10. This specimen indicates the direct cultural contact with Sri Lanka. The toes of the Buddha are made of three segments which is the common feature of depicting sacred footprints in Southeast Asia even today. Similar footprints have been found in Sri Lanka and also in Southern India. Several votive stupas and stupa-like structures in miniature have

come to light from the expeditions in 1983 and 1984 from Nilandhoo island of Faaf Atoll, Fig.7.11. It is worth mentioning that many such structures are lost as several limestone fragments from such structures had been reused for building the boundary walls of Nilandhooavitta. Thus, all these elements have to be studied at length to understand the network and Maldivian connections with the other parts of the world.

The site of Veymandoo has yielded Buddhist artefacts which includes a gold leaf and from the island of Nilandhooa a coral stone casket bearing sculptural art and inscription has been reported. This is first of its kind from Maldives, bearing Vajrayana traits. The inscription is in Pallava Grantha script of the 10th-11th centuries CE.¹⁹ Another stone relic casket was reported by Freener's team from the Fuamullah Atoll. Here they had unearthed a large statue base, underneath which a stone coral casket was found. It contained deposits of cowrie shells which is quite interesting, as here cowries were in ritualistic context and acted as a ritualistic money offered to the deceased for crossing this world.

III

Among the Persian writers, Sulaiman was the first to mention Maldives. According to him the country was ruled by a woman and among the major exports from Maldives, he mentions ambergris and cowries. He also mentioned about the ship-building activities of the Maldivians. In his description he stated that the wealth of the people is constituted by cowries, if taken as direct evidence of cowries as the official medium of exchange of Maldives this is not correct. As he mentions that their Queen amasses large quantities of these cowries in the royal depots. These islanders were expert in weaving, so much so that Sulaiman mentions that they weave tunics of a single piece with two sleeves, two facings of the collar and the opening of the chest. They build ships, houses and execute all sorts of work with a consummate art.

Maldives and the Lakshadweep islands were distinguished by the foreigners who visited these islands. Abu Zayd, from Iraq (850-934 CE) in his writings clearly distinguished between these two and, interestingly, they were named after the commodities which they exported. Maldives is mentioned as *Diva-Kauzah*, The Cowrie Islands, and the Lakshadweep as *Diva-Kanbar*, The Coir Islands. Thus these islands were named after their chief produce, i.e. cowries and coconut coir. Al Masudi (10th century CE) and Al Beruni (11th century CE) claimed that Queen had no other money than cowrie.²⁰ In course of his description of wealth Masudi mentions the technique of cowrie fishing. In the words of Masudi when the Queen sees her treasure diminishing, she orders her islanders to cut coco branches with their leaves, and to throw them upon the surface of the water. To these the creature attaches themselves and are then collected and spread upon the sandy beaches, where the sun rots them, and leaves only empty shells, which are then carried to the treasury.²¹ According to Ma Huan and Wang Zhen (15th century CE) cowries were piled into mountains and when the flesh had decayed, they were sold to Siam and Bengal, where they were used as money. They reported that Chinese ships occasionally visited Maldives to purchase ambergris. In Jiangnan area in Lower Yangzi delta from 1279-1644 there were a numerous cowrie storage in government treasuries. It is possible that these cowrie shells were used as ballast for these Chinese ships.²² The descriptions given by Sulaiman and Al Masudi have been misinterpreted by later scholars as direct evidence of cowrie being used as money in Maldives. Actually, they mention cowries as a source of wealth for the Maldivians and not wealth as in hardcore money of the Maldivians. This is further attested in the writings of Wang Dayuan 14th century CE who clearly mentions that cowries did not function as actual money in Maldives.

Maldives had a regular connection with Sri Lanka, as the travel to Sri Lanka would not have taken long and was not dependent on specific weather/ wind. This is attested by the major impact of Sinhalese Buddhist art on the sculptures from Maldives. Chinese chronicles refer to a sea voyage from Sri Lanka to Mo-lai (Maldives) in the 7th century CE which was undertaken in four days. It is interesting to note that the chronicle mentions that Mo-lai or Maldives was situated in the extreme Southern frontier of South India. Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis (c.360-430 CE) wrote of thousands of islands called Maniolae (Maldives) that lie around Taprobane, i.e. Sri Lanka.²³ Thus, this reference to Maldives in connection with Sri Lanka is also an indication of its contact in the 4th-5th century CE as known to the westerners.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that Naseema Mohamed²⁴ clarified that the season for sailing east was during the south-west monsoon (in Maldivian *Hulhan' gu*), which started from the second week of April when ships could undertake a journey to Bengal, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia. She further mentions pointing towards a close contact between the Indonesian islands and Maldives, as a part of an Atoll in Maldives was called Java Kara, by islanders. The north-east monsoon (in Maldivian *Iruvai*), which began during the second week of December, was the time of the year for travel to Arabia, the Persian Gulf and the East Coast of Africa.

As we have pointed out that the ideal season for sailing eastwards from Maldives was during the south-west monsoon, which started from the second week of April, Bengal bound ships would have used cowrie shells both as ballast and trade goods. This is also the harvest season in Bengal and the ships on their return journey would have carried back rice. If the evidence of manufacturing of cotton fabric is taken at its face-value then one has to assume that the raw material was also imported from India and the Maldivians had mastered the art of producing the finished goods in the islands.

The discovery of Roman coins from few sites in Maldives and Lakshadweep islands is quite interesting. In this context it is worth mentioning that two coins were reported from a relic casket made of hard white stone or coral from the Toddu or Thoddoo island by its excavator Ismail Didi. The print of one of the coins was brought to United Kingdom in 1980 by Andrew W. Forbes and his wife.²⁵ Lowick identified it as a Roman Republican denarius of Gaius Vibius Pansa Caetronianus, minted at Rome in 90 BCE, Fig.7.12. The report tells that the Toddu coin shows on its obverse the head of Apollo facing to the right, whilst the name PANSA, which should appear behind (i.e. to the left of) the head, has been completely worn away. On the reverse of the coin, more readily distinguishable, is the figure of Minerva in quadriga (chariot drawn by four horses), with horses galloping; in her right hand she holds a trophy (no longer distinguishable), and in her left a spear and the reins. It is pierced and has evidently been used as a pendant. The second coin went missing and hence it remains unidentified. Very few coins of the Republican period have been found in either India or in Ceylon. But how this Roman Republican denarius of the 1st century BCE reached Maldives is interesting and it being enclosed in a ceremonial relic-casket in Toddu/ Thoddoo Island in the north-central Maldives reflects that Buddhism spread to these islands quite early. A Buddha sculpture has also been reported from this island, Fig.7.13.

Another Roman coin was reported from Kadamat Island in Lakshadweep.²⁶ These were early coins of 1st -2nd century CE when Indo-Roman trade was at its zenith. A Roman gold coin which may be attributed to the Roman Emperor of the east Leo I, Fig.7.14, datable to 5th-6th century CE have also

been reported from Gan Island in Haddhummathi Atoll.²⁷ These were found in a container, buried at the site of an old monastery. Thus placing coins in the relic caskets was a common feature in Maldives. This cultural practice was adopted from the Indian subcontinent. However the discovery of Roman coins is quite significant as it not only indicates early contact with the Maldives but also the spread of Buddhism to these islands sometime around 1-2nd century CE. As these Republican coins were rare, they would not have travelled late to these islands.



Fig.7.7 : Buddha image, bronze, Gaddho, Laamu Atoll, Maldives, Courtesy: Egil Mikkelsen

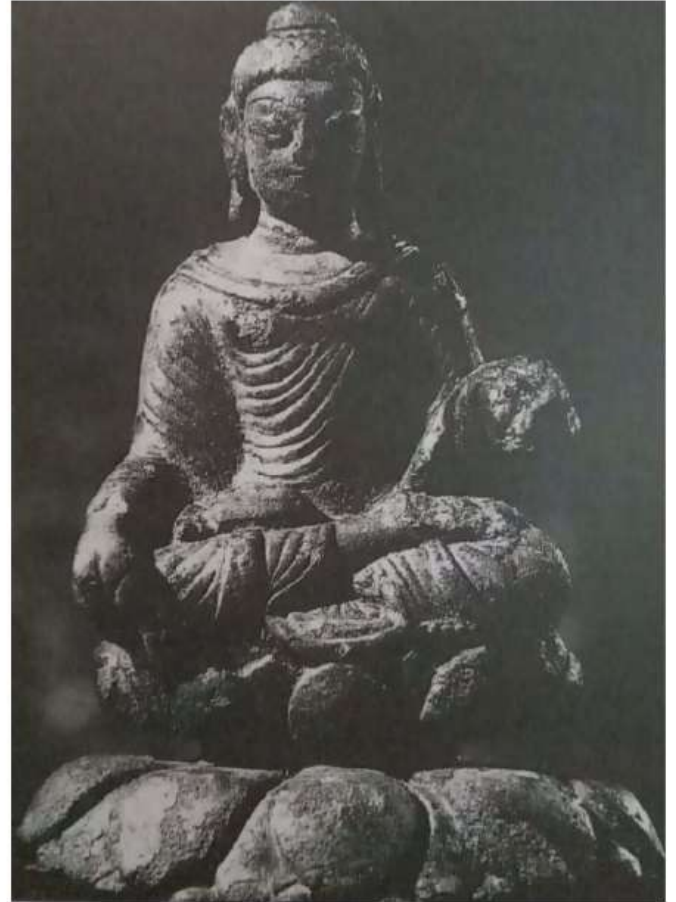


Fig.7.8 : Buddha image, bronze, Helgo, Sweden

IV

Among the items produced and exported from Maldives, Ibn Battuta mentioned coir ropes, cowrie shells, dried fish, cotton cloth, cotton turban as well as brass utensils as the local products of Maldives. These items were exported to India, China and Yemen. Brass production is difficult in the islands as the raw material is not available. Moreover cotton is also not produced here. Wang Dayuan also listed similar indigenous items of Maldives. He called broadedcloth *liubu* which he also mentions that the people of Xiali probably Alwaye, Cochin wear such cotton and it was witnessed by him.²⁸ Wang noted same form of clothing in Luwei probably Ratburi in Gulf of Siam.²⁹ Ma Huan and Wang Zhen (15th century) did also include a list of fabrics, one of the local products, exported by Maldivians.³⁰ Since Maldives did not produce cotton, they must have imported it from India and in Maldives it was probably processed to further export to the other parts.³¹ Rice and many other commodities were not available in the islands,

and they had to be imported from abroad, mainly from Bengal and Burma. J. de Barros in the mid-16th century mentioned about the local products of Maldives such as fish, oil, cocos and jaggery. These were the products exported and guaranteed a good profit.³²

During the reign of Emperor Julianus Ammianus Marcellinus (c.330-400 CE), a Greek from Antiokia mentioned about India and neighbouring countries sending gifts to please the emperor. While referring to India and its neighbouring places, he mentions Divi (Maldives) and the Serendivi (Sri Lanka), from these places leading men went to the west with gifts ahead of time.³³ Recently several inscriptions have been discovered from Socotra islands which are in Brahmi script and mention several names of Dravidian origin.³⁴ This attests to the travel of these people to the western countries. A Buddhist sculpture has recently been reported from Berenike and also an inscription in Brahmi referring to a Kshatrap. Sending out such tributes to countries far and wide was a common practice. Similar historical evidences have been found regarding sending of tribute to China in 658 CE and again in 662 CE. In 658 CE the king Fa-t'o-pa-ti of the kingdom of Tsien-su-fou (not known), the king Cho-li-kiun of the kingdom of Che-li-t'i-p'o (Serendive or Sri Lanka), the king Che-p'o-lo-ti-to (Sri Bālāditya) of the kingdom of Molai (Maldives), sent ambassadors to pay tribute (to the Emperor of China). Naseema Mohmed on the basis of such references concludes that Maldivians of that period had seaworthy craft and adequate navigational knowledge to undertake long voyages and frequently undertook such travels. However, this is not conclusive as they may undertake journeys in ships from other countries as well.



Fig.7.9 : *Stupa ruins after excavation, Thoddoo, Courtesy: Maldives Royal Family*



Fig.7.10 : Buddha's footprint, Vadu Islands, Maldives



Fig.7.11 : Miniature Votive Stupa, Nilandhoo



Fig.7.12 : Roman Republican denarius of Gaius Vibius Pansa Caetronianus, minted at Rome in 90 BCE, Toddu/Thoddoo islands, Maldives



Fig.7.14 : Roman gold coin of Emperor Leo I (c. 457-474 century CE) found inside a container, probably a relic casket, Gan island, Maldives, Courtesy: NCLHR, public domain



Fig.7.13 : Buddha statue, Thoddoo, Maldives, Courtesy: Maldives Royal Family (Source: http://maldivesroyalfamily.com/maldives_still_disrespects_what_is_holy_to_others.shtml)

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