

PRE-ISLAMIC MALDIVES

by
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Abstract

Maldives is a small country, a double string of coral islands, none of which are very large. Nevertheless, in spite of its small size, the country has been populated for well over 2000 years. With research and archaeological excavations, the ancient history of the islands is at last coming to light.

The language of the Maldives, Dhivehi, is of Indic origin, the people are of different ethnicities, perhaps because of the strategic position of the islands, almost in the centre of the most travelled routes in the Indian Ocean. Ships called at the Maldives, stopping over during the stormy days of the monsoon, on their way to the East and on the return journey. Trading ships also called at the islands, bartering their goods for cowries, ambergris, tortoise shells, fish and coir rope. Some of the industries of the islands were fishing, rope-making, weaving, boat building and coconut cultivation.

Maldives converted to Islam in 1153 A.D. Recent archaeological evidence proves that until the advent of Islam, the Buddhist religion had existed in the country. Buddhist relics and ruins of monasteries have been found in many islands. Additional evidence of a Buddhistic past was found in late 12th century copperplate grants, translated in the 1980's.

The islands had their own customs and culture. Ruled by their kings and queens for many centuries, the islands seem to have remained an independent kingdom through most of its known history. Maldives had its own system of rule, which seemed to have been suitable to the geographical setting of this unique archipelago.

Mention of islands identifiable as Maldives were made in ancient Buddhist texts of India and Sri Lanka. Roman and Greek writers, and in later centuries, Chinese, Arab and Persian records also mention the Maldives. These records reveal that the ancient Maldivians were seafarers and travelled long distances, to Rome, China, and perhaps other distant countries for which no records now exist.

More extensive research, including scientific excavation of archaeological sites, will help us gain a clearer picture of the country's pre-Islamic past.

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Introduction

The Maldives are said to be little known, even “ unheard of ” by many writers, perhaps because of their insignificant size and because the islands did not possess the mineral or agricultural wealth desired by the medieval world. However, the islands have been populated for over two thousand years, as shown by recent archaeological excavations. Due to the climatic conditions, the heat and humidity, which do not make for the long survival of artifacts, and the fact that most artifacts produced in the islands have of necessity been made of non-durable materials, there is little to show as evidence of the nation’s long history. The fact that the Maldives did not come to the attention of the better-known countries of the medieval world preserved the country’s anonymity for hundreds of years.

In recent years efforts have been made to bring at least some of this history to light, through archaeological and historical research and linguistic studies. Archaeological evidence as well as copperplate records led to the discovery of the country’s Buddhistic past during the pre-Islamic period. Research into the cowrie shell trade, has shown that these islands had supplied cowries to many of the countries bordering the Indian Ocean and countries further afield (Heimann 1980:48). Excavations have revealed that there was a constant trade with Chinese vessels, which called at the Maldives on their way to trade with the countries of the Middle East. These facts become self evident when the strategic position of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean is taken into context. The Indian Ocean was reputed to be the most travelled ocean in the ancient world, and therefore the islands which lie in its central position is an easy port of call for food and water besides being a safe harbour during the monsoons.

There are few sources of information about the pre – Islamic period of Maldives. Available information indicates that there was “a matriarchal society, with myths and magico-religious beliefs, a system of class distinctions instead of the caste system” in existence in many other South Asian countries, a king who was a father figure and whose power was supreme, and a ruling system, “which was guided by time honoured customs and traditions”(Maniku 1993: 39).

According to available historical sources, the islands converted to Islam in 1153 A.D., during the reign of King Tribhuvana Aaditya of the Theemuge Dynasty.

Copperplate Grants from the 12th Century A.D.

The oldest and most accurate Divehi records are copperplate grants from the late 12th century known as “loamaafaanu ”. These loamaafaanu are specifically records of official grants given by the ruling king to individual mosques, bestowing on them the benefits from various islands for their expenditure and upkeep. Some of these copperplate grants were first translated into modern Divehi and English in 1922, and more comprehensive translations of two of these grants were made in 1982 and 1986. These translations opened up a whole new area for research on the ancient history and customs of the people of the Maldives.

The copperplate grants, or loamaafaanu, of the 12th century records the names of the kings of the late pre- Islamic period. The first king recorded in the loamaafaanus is “the great King, Shri Mahaabarana of the noble house of Theemuge, the lord of the prosperous Lunar Dynasty”(Maniku, Wijeyawardhana 1986: 1) who ascended the throne in c.1118 A.D. This king was the founder of the Theemuge Dynasty, which ruled the country from c.1118 until c.1388 A.D. He is said to have become “king of this entire country” and ruled for a period of twenty-one years, perhaps implying that at the time of his ascension to the throne, the country was divided, and that he brought the kingdom under one rule. King Mahaabarana is thought to be the Kaimala Kalo(or Koimala Kalo) of legend, a foreigner of noble blood who arrived in Maldives with his family, and was invited by the islanders to become their king. “Kaimal” is said to be a title given to certain Keralese noblemen (Bouchon 1988:225), therefore it is quite possible that this was a nobleman from Malabar fleeing a hostile situation in his country. Mahaabarana was succeeded by his nephew, Swasthi Shri Tribhuvana Aadheethiya, who ruled for a period of thirty-five years. It was during Tribhuvana Aadheethiya’s reign, in the year 1153 A.D., that Maldives converted to Islam.

The copperplates also cast some light on the system of government and way of life that existed in the country at the time. The script and the language of these loamaafaanu take us back more than eight hundred years and give us an idea of the older Divehi language, before the changes brought about by the influence of Persian, Arabic and European languages. The loamaafaanu usually gave the name and lineage of the king who built the mosque, the circumstances in which the mosque was built, and other important information regarding the location and also, the names of the witnesses to the grant.

The two oldest of the existing loamaafaanu copperplate grants were translated in 1982 and 1986. One of these grants, the Isdhoo Loamaafaanu was written in 1195 and the other, the Dhan’bidhoo Loamaafaanu in 1196 A.D. These dates were 42 and 43 years respectively, after the official conversion of Maldives to Islam, but the incidents recorded in both loamaafaanu show that the mosques in the two islands, Isdhoo and Dhan’bidhoo were built immediately after their conversion (Wijeyawardhana and Dissanayaka 1982, Maniku and Wijeyawardhana 1986). This places the dates of their conversion at 1195 and 1196 A.D., and reveals the fact that although Maldives had officially converted to Islam in 1153 A.D., all the islands did not embrace the religion at the same time. Due to the distances and difficulties of travel within the atolls, conversion of the entire country took much longer, and until then the existing customs prevailed. Since these copperplates were inscribed soon after the conversion, most of the customs and system of government of the earlier days remained unchanged at the time of writing, and therefore, we have a reliable record of some of the culture and customs that existed at the end of the Buddhist period in Maldives.

The Dan’bidhoo Loamaafaanu (Fig.1.) is written in the Eveyla script in old Dhivehi, and describes the conversion of the island of Dhan’bidhoo by Sri Gadanaaditya, the reigning king of the Theemuge Dynasty. He is said to have converted the inhabitants of the island, destroyed the monastery, and in its place, built a mosque, naming it the Juma Masjidu (Friday Mosque). The community of monks in the island was disbanded, the chief clans of the island were identified and groups were formed to carry out Government duties. Generous concessions were made to the poor of the island. Noteworthy is the fact that the ruler had accurate information regarding the islands of the kingdom mentioned in the grant. Donations to this mosque were to be given from some of the land in Male’ as well

(Wijeyawardhana and Dissanayake 1982; Najeeb 2001), showing that even during ancient times, the principal island had responsibilities towards distant islands of the kingdom.

Isdhoo Loamaafaanu written in 1195 A.D., also in the Eveyyla script, was translated in 1986, and gives more information on existing customs. A description is given on how a dwelling for one of the eminent families of the island should be constructed, including instructions to cover the walls with Chinese silk (Maniku and Wijayawardhana 1986: 23). This account is evidence of the fact that Chinese silk was a familiar commodity, giving rise to the assumption that Chinese trading ships stopped at Maldives on their way to the Middle East, exchanging their silks and other goods for the commodities they needed through the common barter system. Other indications of the Chinese trade, lies in the fact that shards of Chinese pottery dating to between the 9th and 19th centuries were found in Maldives (Carswell 1996:505).

The copperplates also reveal that the rulers in the capital of Male' were aware of developments in other islands, even though travel between islands was difficult and time consuming. The witnesses to the grant were ministers of the king; among the titles of these ministers are some that existed until the mid-twentieth century. There was also a system of land grant to families. These properties remained in families for generations, within a matrilineal system of inheritance.

Information from Foreign Sources

There are some early sources of information, which may be referred to, that could also shed light on pre-Islamic Maldives. The earliest mention of the Maldives, is in ancient Buddhist Jatakas and in Sri Lankan texts, which refer to events that occurred between 300 – 250 B.C. A reference in the Mahavansa indicates the arrival of a group of exiles in the Maldives around the period 300 B.C., at the same time as another group arrived in Sri Lanka. These two groups are said to have come from the same place of origin in western India (Maloney 1980). This could accommodate the hypothesis that Divehi and Sinhalese separated from the same Prakrit (Cain 2000:3), which itself could have evolved in India.

The next mention of Maldives occurs in records of Roman and Greek writers, covering the period 90 – 522 A.D., proving that the Maldives were known to travellers in the Mediterranean countries. In 362 A.D., Ammianus Marcellinus records that among other nations, the “Divis”(Maldivians) sent gifts to the Emperor Julian (Bell 1940:16; Maloney 1980:415). Other writers who have mentioned islands which may be identified as Maldives include Pappus of Alexandria (about the end of the 4th century), Scholasticus the Theban (circa AD 400) and Cosmas Indicopleustes (circa 535 AD) who probably gives the first eyewitness description of the islands (Maloney 1980; Mikkelsen 2000).

Chinese documents from 658 and 662 A.D. record visits to China from ambassadors of King Baladitya of Maldives, who brought gifts to the Emperor of China, consisting of products from their country. These documents also mention the dependence of Maldives as well as some other countries of the South Asian region on the ruler of South India, showing that at that time, there was an inter-dependence of these countries on the sub-continent, and that they had contacts with one another.

Other informative sources are the written records of travellers who came to the Maldives during the period in question. Some writers wrote their records from hearsay, and some from first hand information gathered during their travels in the Indian Ocean. Among these are Arab and Persian travellers and merchants, who crossed the Indian Ocean in search of commercial opportunities in the trade in ambergris, tortoise shell and spices. The descriptions given by some of these travellers are convincing and corroborate the information given in other accounts. There are also descriptions of boat-building techniques unknown to the visitors; techniques used Maldives until recent times.

The most accurate information on Maldives, is given by Sulaiman (850 A.D.), Al Masudi (visited Sri Lanka in 916 A.D.), Al Biruni (1030 A.D.) and Al Idrisi (1150 A.D.). These writers give detailed information about Pre-Islamic Maldives, which they called Divah or Dibadjat, its people, culture and society as well as trade (Bell 1940; Maloney 1980; Mikkelsen 2000).

Accurate geographical descriptions of Maldives are given, about islands that lie between the sea of Harkand (Bay of Bengal) and that of Lar (Gujarat), and number up to 1,900. The produce of the islands, including ambergris from the seashore and cowries collected in the same way as in later centuries, are mentioned. Weaving of fabric, building of ships and houses and all kinds of work are said to have been executed with consummate art. These accounts say that a queen ruled the islands, and the wealth of the country consisted of cowries, which the queen amassed in large quantities in the royal depots (Sulaiman 850 A.D.; Masudi 916 A.D.).

The erosion of some islands, the formation of new islands, and the migration of the populations from one to another, is described in detail (Abu Zayd 890 A.D., Al Biruni 1030 A.D.). Al Jawaliqi, writing in 1135 A.D., describes a queen named “Danhara” who wore a robe of gold fabric, rode on an elephant and was accompanied by her attendants and army. She was the ruler of the kingdom and lived on an island called Abannba (Male’), where the inhabitants were in great number (Al Jawaliqi 1135 A.D.). Al Idrisi, writing in 1150 A.D. calls this chief island “Ambriya”(Al Idrisi c.1150).

The best description of the pre-Islamic culture of Maldives is given by Al-Idrisi. Writing in Arabic in his book, “Kitab Nuzhat Al Mushtaq Fi Ikhtiraq Al Afaq” he described some of the customs of the country. He says that the islands had a king who united them, protected and defended them and made truce according to his ability. His wife acted as arbitrator among the people and did not veil herself from them. When she issued any orders, her husband, the chief, although he was present, did not interfere with any of her ordinances. It had always been a custom with them that women arbitrated, a custom they always upheld. Al Idrisi also says that this queen had riches, which she collected by means of certain known taxes, and she then gave in charity the wealth thus acquired to the needy inhabitants of her country. Her subjects are said to have hung silk cloths along her route during her public appearances (Al Idrisi c.1150 A.D.).

Al Idrisi states that tortoise shell was the merchandise of the people of Dibajat (Maldives). He writes that coconuts were cultivated on the islands and cowries were used as means of exchange and these were said to comprise most of the King’s treasures. He described the

inhabitants of Dibajat as accomplished and skilful craftsmen. As an example, he says they would weave a shirt with its two sleeves, its gores and its pocket, all in one piece. He also states that the islanders built boats of small pieces of wood, and substantial houses and other excellent buildings of hard stones. They are said to have constructed wooden houses that floated on the water. These were probably storehouses for coconuts, built on platforms in the shallow water, to keep out rodents. These wooden houses were called “moodhuge”(sea houses), and were in use until the early years of the 20th century. Sometimes the islanders used perfumed sandalwood in their buildings, for pride and display (Al Idrisi c.1150 A.D.).

He also speaks of the “sewn” boats used for travel in the “Sea of India and China”. Whether big or small, these were constructed out of well-hewn wood. The planks were put edge-to-edge and trimmed and then “sewn with fibre” (tied with coir rope). The boats were then caulked with the oil of the sperm whale, to stop up the seams. Even at the present day, boat building in Maldives is called “dhoani banun”, which literally means tying boats, the term used in the days when the above technique was employed. People from Oman and Marbat (Hadramaut), belonging to Yemen, came to the islands and cut the wood of the coconut palms and made ropes from the fibre of the palm with which they tied up the wood. They took this wood back to their own countries and sold it or used it for different purposes (Al Idrisi c.1150 A.D.).

Trading links with other countries seem to have been established very early. Cowrie shell exports from the Maldives can be traced to the early centuries of the first millennium, which links Bengali, African and even European sources. The discovery of a Roman coin, identified as a Roman Republican Denarius of Caius Vibius Pansa minted at Rome in either 90 or 89 B.C. within a reliquary of a Buddhist stupa excavated during 1958 in the Maldives (Forbes 1982), gives rise to many questions. The worn state of the coin and the fact that it was pierced indicated that it had been used for some years before ending up in the ancient stupa. It also seems to indicate that some early contacts were made between the Roman trading establishments in India and the Maldives. The reason for these contacts, if any, may have been the availability of cowrie shells, money cowrie (*cypraea moneta*), in the islands. Cowrie shells have been discovered in many different places of the ancient world, and the primary producer of most of these was understood to be the Maldives (Heimann 1980). As stated earlier in the literary sources, indications are, that the Maldives was known to the outside world as early as in the Roman period.

Archaeological Evidence

It has been established that Buddhism was the religion of the Maldives before the conversion to Islam in 1153 A.D. Evidence of this fact is overwhelming. Mounds containing ancient Buddhist artifacts have been found in many islands throughout the Maldives. The first reference to archaeological sites in Maldives was made in 1835, by English naval officers Lieutenants I.A.Young and W.Christopher. They had been told by a Buddhist priest, “who was well-read in Sinhalese Books, that two noted Temples of Buddha” formerly existed in Maldives (Bell 1940:104)). Two other visitors to Maldives, Mr. C. W. Rosset in 1886, and Mr. J. Stanley Gardiner in 1900, also recorded information on the presence of ruins of Buddhist buildings on several islands (Bell 1940:104-105).

However, the most valuable contribution to archaeological data on pre-Islamic Maldives was made by Mr. H. C. P. Bell, who collected a wealth of information during his later visits to Maldives. Mr. Bell first visited Maldives in 1879 on another mission, and at the end of that visit, he made the following observations in his provisional report:

“Whilst the evidence so far available is both quite insufficient, and of a nature too vague, to warrant definite conclusion, it is far from improbable that a close scrutiny of names of Islands, of non-Muhammadan (non-Muslim) customs and festivals, and, above all, an Archaeological Survey will make it abundantly clear that Buddhist Missionaries, in the spirit of the Asoka Edicts, departing to intermingle among all unbelievers, teaching better things, carried their doctrine across the sea even to the despised and little known Maldives.” (Bell 1940: 104).

The above observation suggests that Mr. Bell felt that it was quite probable that Buddhism was brought to the Maldives about the same time as when missionary activity encouraged by Emperor Asoka took place, resulting in the establishment of the religion in many South Asian countries. However, it is left to doubt, whether the ancient missionaries regarded the Maldives as “despised and little known.” As additional evidence of the islands’ past religion, Mr. Bell noted the titles given to Maldivian royalty, and further, the names of certain islands, which were suggestive of a Buddhistic past.

Mr. Bell returned twice more to Maldives. He visited many of the islands in the southern atolls, which contained ancient mounds and investigated some of them. His findings were published in detail in his monograph on the history, archaeology and epigraphy of Maldives in 1940. These and subsequent findings of amateur Maldivian archaeologists proved beyond doubt that Buddhist places of worship existed in Maldives before the conversion to Islam.

In July 1958, a Maldivian team excavated the archaeological site in Thoddoo island in Ari Atoll, where a figure of the Buddha (Fig.2.) and a relic casket was found. This was the reliquary in which the earlier mentioned Roman coin was found.

An amateur archaeological expedition was undertaken by a Maldivian team in February 1959, to Ariadhoo island in Ari Atoll, where some ancient mounds were investigated. No Buddhist relics were found, but another important relic was excavated, a carved coral phallus (linga), 15 inches in height and 12 inches in circumference at the base (Maniku 1993:41). This was a unique find in Maldives, and lent weight to the theory that Hinduism had also existed in the country during a bygone age.

In later years, several artifacts including images, caskets and miniature stupas belonging to the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism, were found in various places in Male’ and in Ari Atoll. A later archaeological find, also of Vajrayana context, had carvings of Hindu deities Siva, Lakshmi, Kubera and sage Agasthiya. The cult of sage Agasthiya, being related to maritime activities, was common in South India, Sri Lanka and also in Southeast Asia (Ragupathy 1994).

In 1983-84 the Maldivian Government in collaboration with the Kon-Tiki Museum of Oslo, undertook some excavations in Nilandhoo in Nilandhoo Atoll, one of the southern

atolls of Maldives. The report of this expedition states that the ancient Havitta (chaitya) ruin on Nilandhoo Island was built about 400 years before the conversion to Islam. It further stated that the finds of discarded building material with classic designs, in the fill inside the ruins, indicated an older structure in the same locality, or in the neighbourhood (Skjolsvold 1991). This could indicate an older Buddhist structure, or one belonging to an earlier religion, since the ancient Maldivians built places of worship on older sites, after destroying the existing buildings.

The same team visited other islands, which had ancient sites, including Vaadhoo and Gan in South Huvadho Atoll. During their short stay in Gan, they found interesting material, reminiscent of such sites in other countries of the region. Finds from Bodu Havitta, the biggest mound on the island, included many decorated and moulded coral stone fragments with a common motif. These were decorative elements including symbols of concentric circles with a trisected band-like decoration on either side. They found especially striking, the similarity of this design with the decoration displayed on a marble panel at Amaravati, depicting "The Great Departure", a panel dated to the second century A. D. The same motif occurs on railings at the entrance of a Buddhist cave sanctuary at Udayagiri in Orissa (Skjolsvold 1991:52-54 and 67-69). Due to the lack of time, the team did not have the opportunity to carry out a full excavation of the site.

In cooperation with the National Centre for Linguistics and Historical Research in Male', archaeological excavations were conducted at Kaashidhoo Island in Kaafu Atoll, by Professor Egil Mikkelsen of the University of Oslo, Norway, from 1996 to 1998. These excavations revealed that a Buddhist culture was established there "in the first part of the first millennium A.D. probably founded on an Indian origin. Exchange relations were established with South Asia and according to written sources, also with the Roman World, and later also with China"(Mikkelsen 2000:22). There was also a Chinese bronze coin, a cash-coin from the Northern Song Dynasty, struck under the Emperor T'ai Tsung in 990-94 A.D (Mikkelsen 2000:21), indicating Chinese contacts in the 10th century.

The available findings led Mikkelsen to believe that cowrie shells played an important role in the Buddhist culture and religion that existed in Maldives at that time, symbolically, as well as in terms of economics. In his report he states that, around 500 A.D. when cowrie shells spread to northern and central Europe, as shown by archaeological finds, they were also mentioned as trading products from Maldives (Mikkelsen 2000). The ruler of Maldives had control over the export and exchange of cowrie shells, leading to the import of other commodities such as beads, gold and silver as well as metal objects which were not available in Maldives. Other materials exchanged for cowries included pottery, china and clay objects for everyday use. Mikkelsen was of the opinion that this provided for a rich monastic culture in Maldives and that it could have been the start of the spread of cowrie shells to the north. He felt that distance in itself was not necessarily a limitation on contact (Mikkelsen 2000), which is proven by the fact that cowrie shells from islands in the Indian Ocean found their way to the Far East, even to distant China.

Among the relics found at the Kaashidhoo site were offerings of bones of the giant tortoise (*Aldabrachelys elephantina*), showing that this species existed in Maldives at that time. Bones of turtles were also found (Mikkelsen 2000:17).

During the last Buddhist period before the introduction of Islam, from the 10th to the late 12th century, part of the monastery site was used as a burial ground. Bones from four graves were carbon dated, resulting in dates varying between the late 9th to the 12th century A.D.

According to Mikkelsen's findings, there were several different stages in the building of the Kaashidhoo monastery, the structures being founded on different levels on older floors. In some places, white coral sand had been used to cover older structures before the construction of new buildings. Since the conclusion reached was, that building commenced around the beginning of the 3rd century A.D., and continued until the 6th century A.D., it may be assumed that by the 3rd century A.D., Buddhism had been well established in Kaashidhoo. Mikkelsen felt that the building of miniature stupas, and conducting of sacrificial ceremonies continued through the 7th to the 9th century. He found many similarities to the type of construction found at Kaashidhoo, at Ratnagira in Orissa state in India. (Mikkelsen 2000:21).

Language and Scripts

Linguistic research into the Dhivehi (Maldivian) language shows a divergence of Dhivehi from its mother language as early as the 2nd or 1st century B.C (Cain 2000), indicating that speakers of this idiom may have arrived in the Maldives prior to this period. Linguistic evidence shows a close relationship between Dhivehi and Sinhala, both languages having evolved from the same Prakrit, Proto-Dhivehi-Sinhala. B.Cain (2000:3) is of the opinion that "perhaps as early as the 2nd c. B.C., Proto-Dhivehi-Sinhala came to the Maldives and became the lingua franca of a diverse population made up of Aryan speakers, Dravidians and possibly others"(Cain 2000:3). Frequent contact with neighbouring countries resulted in their influence on Dhivehi and its development through the following centuries.

The earliest palaeographically datable inscription found in Maldives is a Sanskrit inscription of Vajrayana Buddhism written in the Nagari script and can be dated to the 9th century A.D. (Ragupathy 1994). This inscription is on the cover of a coral stone casket (Fig.3.)

The earliest Maldivian script is Eveyla Akuru, the oldest examples of which can be found on the Vajrayana images and artifacts that may be datable from the 9th to the 10th century A.D. Later examples of this script can be found in the copperplate records of the 12th and 13th century A.D. Eveyla Akuru has close affinities with Sinhala Elu and Tamil and Malayalam Vatteluttu scripts. As these scripts evolved from a common branch of Brahmi, there are strong similarities between Eveyla, Elu and the South Indian scripts (Ragupathy 1994).

Conclusion

Interpreting the information gathered from sources within Maldives and data gathered from documents from various parts of the world, the conclusion may be reached that Maldives has been peopled for more than 2000 years. The earliest religion followed by the Maldivians is not known, but the theory that Hinduism had existed at some ancient period

cannot be discarded. Immediately prior to the conversion to Islam, the Buddhist religion existed in the islands, archaeological evidence pointing to a Buddhist culture that was in place in the first part of the first millennium A.D.

The islands were independent for most of its known history, and were ruled by kings and queens. The country had its own system of governance suited to its geographical situation. The rulers of the country maintained contacts with countries of the region and powerful nations. The islanders were hardy seafarers, and travelled long distances. Trading vessels called at Maldives and sailors of the Indian Ocean had a fair knowledge of the country. Structures were constructed out of available materials, hard coral stone and the timber of the coconut palm, which grew in abundance. Fishing, boat building and coconut cultivation were some of the important industries of pre-Islamic Maldives.

The difficulty for researchers of Maldivian history lies in the fact that many records and artifacts of that early period no longer exist, and what remained was neglected for many centuries. However, archaeological excavation could still bring to light the historical information that lies buried beneath the soil of these islands, providing the answers to questions on Maldives' pre-Islamic past.

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