

Tracking the Cowrie Shell: Excavations in the Maldives, 2016

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Introduction

This note reports on archaeological fieldwork undertaken in early 2016 in the Maldives archipelago, involving excavation at three sites and wider surveys. The aim was to identify sites likely to date to the medieval Islamic period, as part of a research project investigating the timescale and nature of the importation of cowrie shells (*Cypraea*) into West Africa, 1150 to 1900 AD. The Maldives are often assumed to have been a main source of these shells; this has never been archaeologically tested. From the 9th century onwards, sporadic mentions were made of these islands, their trade links, and the importance of cowries. Such allusions were made by Arab authors such as al-Bakri and ibn Battuta (Carswell 1975-77; Hiskett 1966a, 1966b; Hogendorn and Johnson 1986), many, incidentally, also describing West Africa. But apart from a survey of pottery unearthed in the Maldivian capital Malé (Carswell 1975-77), no archaeological work had ever investigated the Islamic period.

The importance of cowries in the West African past is well known. They are inevitably mentioned as markers of Africa's global connections (e.g., Johnson 1970; Mitchell 2005; York 1972), and their role within the West African social fabric suggests a deep history. Cowries in West Africa are first mentioned in the mid-10th century, as ornaments in women's hair (Hopkins and Levtzion 2000: 35). In the 11th century al-Bakri states (in Hopkins and Levtzion 2000: 83) that cowries are among the most sought-after commodities in Kugha (seemingly an early capital of the Songhai Empire, in present-day Mali or Niger); by the 14th century, cowries are described as currency, and an import on which vast profits were made (al Umari, in Hopkins and Levtzion 2000: 260, 269). In the 14th century, ibn Battuta saw 1150 cowries sold for one gold dinar in Mali. Simon Lucas, in the late 18th century, explicitly writes that sub-Saharan consumers valued cowries for both ritual and currency usage. Oral traditions today evidence the centrality of cowries to West African thought (see especially Iroko 1987), while archaeology confirms the antiquity of cowrie usage. They are routinely recovered, some well-known instances being the first-millennium necropolis of Kissi, Burkina Faso (Magnavita 2009), a 10th century burial at Akumbu, Mali (Togola 2008), the 11th century 'lost caravan' from the Mauritanian Sahara (Monod 1969), the mound of Yohongou in the Atakora mountains of Benin (Petit 2005, 9th/10th century), and the 15th/16th century site of Durbi Takusheyi, Nigeria (Gronenborn 2011).

Although cowries occur throughout the Indo-Pacific, it is the Maldives specifically which have been described as main exporters of these shells, and we wanted to discover whether this was likely to be accurate. This presumed long-distance connection needed to be adequately tested. The key study of the cowrie trade remains the book by Hogendorn and Johnson (1986), who combined fieldwork in the Maldives with first-hand knowledge of West African economic history to offer detailed data on cowrie flows for the 16th to 19th centuries. Through the cowrie, they sketch a compelling picture of daily life in Asia, Europe, and Africa, and of the succession of merchant groups who brought the shells to West Af-

rica. This is the only detailed synthesis of the topic but, useful as it is, it remains concerned with fluctuations in currency rates following global markets, and gives little in-depth information on local constructions of value. But because in preindustrial societies the value of a medium of exchange may be inextricably linked to social, political or spiritual significance, this economic approach to cowries can only give a very partial story (for this, see especially Ogundiran 2002). Finally, most problematically, beyond the oft-cited medieval sources Hogendorn and Johnson's book gives little insight into the longer time-scale for cowrie usage in West Africa.

Survey and Excavations

As mentioned above, very little archaeology has taken place in the Maldives, and it has mainly focused on Buddhist times (see e.g., Bell 1940; Mikelsen 2000; Skjølsvold 1991). Apart from examinations of (largely surface) potsherds recovered in the 1970s during public works in Malé (Carswell 1975-77), none at all had concerned the medieval period, so we must use other clues to identify locales for excavation. Guidance came from an unpublished report on Maldives cultural heritage (RCRM 2011), historical sources, etymology (Ragupathy and Mohammed 2008), and to some degree from the location and nature of islands and currents (Forbes 1981). The traditionally accepted date for the conversion of the Maldives to Islam is the mid-12th century.

Fieldwork in the Maldives took place January to March 2016. In association with the Maldives Department of Heritage, we conducted excavations on three islands – Utheemu in the far north, Malé the capital, and Veyvah in the centre-south (Figure 1). We also conducted survey on several other islands and were able to locate a number of promising sites for enquiry in the second field season next year. Excavation was by context and all material was sieved.

Excavations at Utheemu

The island of Utheemu had been selected for inves-

tigation for two principal reasons: the island's documented importance in the history of the Maldives, and reports that a cowrie hoard, and various artefacts apparently indicative of medieval trade, had been recovered, both in the palace area and during the development of a field nearby. Our work involved the excavation of five test pits, of which Units 3, 4 and 5 were the most productive and will be discussed here.

Unit 3 was placed in a currently uninhabited zone of the island, slated for development as a tourist zone while Units 4 and 5 were placed within the palace. This palace is a historically significant structure, home of the mid-16th century leader Mohammed Thakurufaanu, who resisted Portuguese occupation of the Maldives.

At Unit 3, excavation strategy was first guided by the execution of 12 shovel test pits. This excavation revealed the presence of two layers: Context 1, grey-brown sand with plentiful rootlets, and below it (at 20-30cm below the surface in most of the pits) Context 2, grey-brown soil with many coral nodules. We placed a 1.5x2m unit near the centre of the area, which allowed us to expose two large coral stone blocks, bearing traces of possible limestone plaster. The slabs are in good condition, and show some evidence of the use of tongue and groove technique. Both lie on a slight incline, and thus seem to have been disturbed from their original position, either due to a collapse of the structure or post-depositional subsidence (Figure 2). The pottery is largely coarse orange-brown low-fired ware, primarily incised and quite thin; and the very occasional potsherd of seeming Chinese origin. The work was left incomplete due to lack of time and we plan to return to this location in 2017.

A 0.75mx3m trench, subsequently extended to 1mx3m, (Unit 4) was laid out inside the palace next to the north entrance (Figure 3). Large quantities of cowries had been uncovered in similar locations adjacent to the northeast and south gates when an electricity cable was laid. It was hoped that a similar cache would be found in Unit 4 enabling us to systematically evaluate the burial conditions of such hoards.

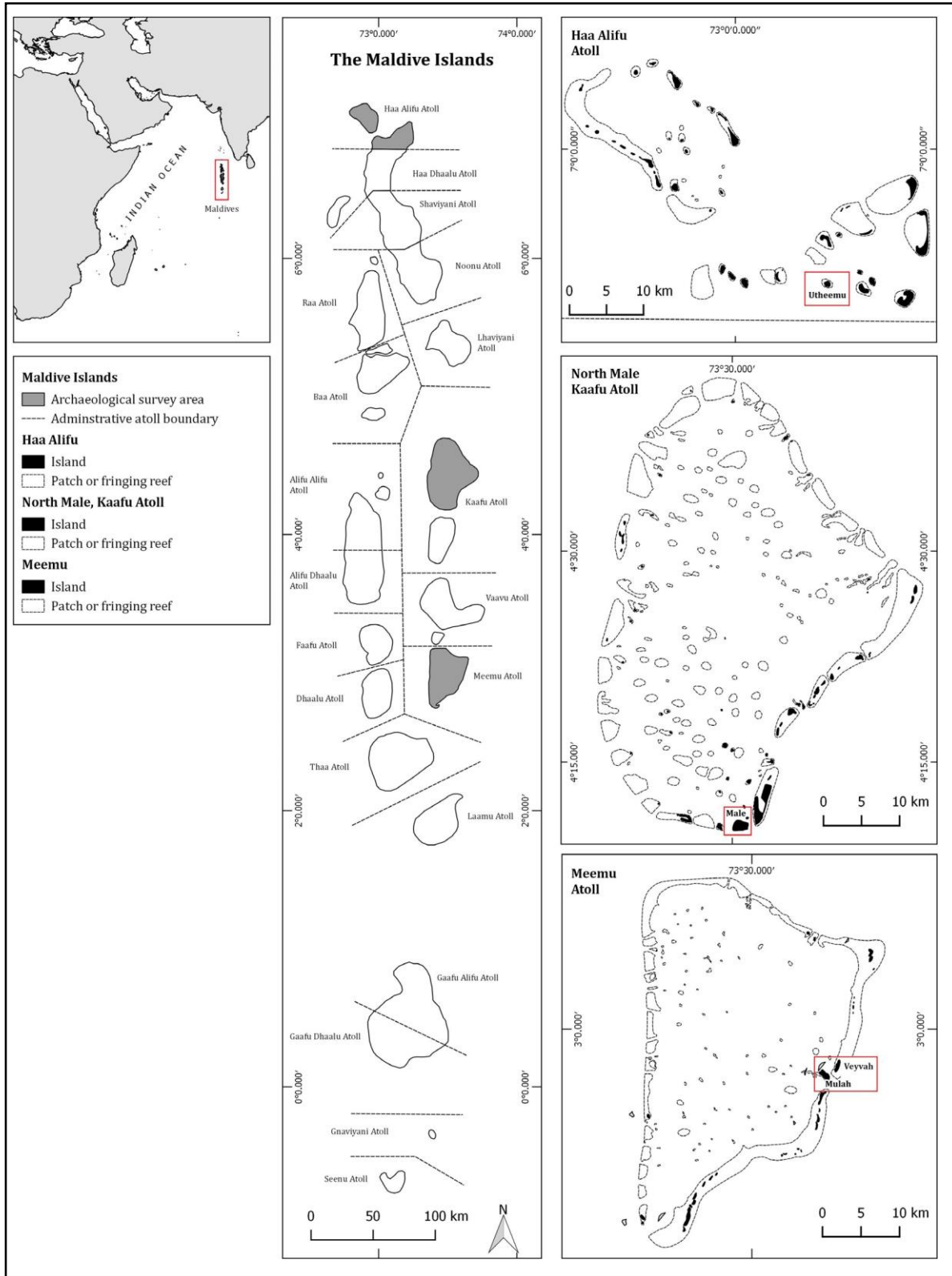


Figure 1: Location map.



Figure 2: Coralstone slabs in Utheemu 3 Unit.

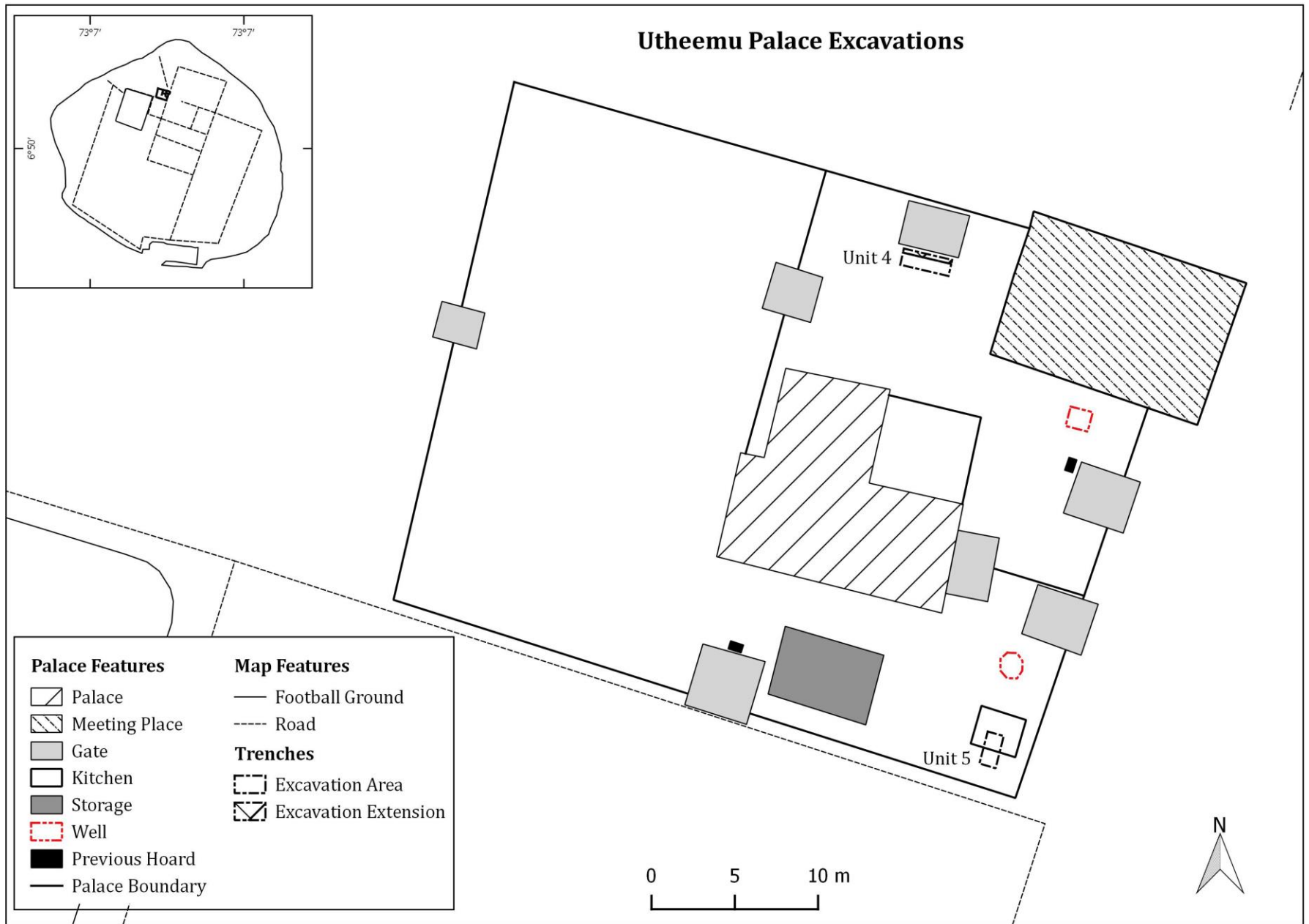


Figure 3: Utheemu palace – location of excavation units.

Six features were uncovered: a linear cut, initially thought to have been intended for a modern cable which bisected the unit from east to west; a second linear cut in which the modern cable was actually located, was subsequently identified. Three pits of varying depth, filled with sterile white sand, were noted; ethnographic data from the islands suggest these might represent putrefaction pits for cowrie shells. A final pit cut the sterile layer. It was not possible to fully excavate the fill of this feature within the time constraints of the excavation, but it is unlikely that it extended much deeper. Archaeological remains including earthenware and ceramic pottery, shell, bone and metal were recovered in most contexts, with a high number of *Cypraea moneta* found in deeper contexts in the centre of the trench. Despite the numbers of cowries recovered, they remain too few and too disparately distributed to be considered a hoard.

Unit 5 was a 1mx2m unit excavated within the alleged kitchen within the women's quarter inside the palace (Figure 4). The trench was placed bisecting the southern side of a wall that according to local informants was constructed about a century ago as a later addition to mark the kitchen area. At a little depth below this wall, a second sandstone wall running parallel was recovered, possibly the original foundation of the kitchen. At the northern side of the unit two burnt floors and a possible hearth were identified. A burial was encountered at *ca.* 1m depth, its position consistent with an Islamic burial (Figure 5). It was highly unexpected to find a grave within the palace complex and according to local informants, human burials had been encountered during construction of a mosque on an adjacent plot – it therefore seems likely that the cemetery once extended towards the palace. Therefore, it is believed that this cemetery could have extended towards the palace complex. Finds from Unit 5 include lots of metal pieces from the first few contexts and abundant charcoal throughout the unit. Several potsherds were also recovered from this unit, most of them being earthenware (including some large rim sherds) and only a few Chinese ceramics.

Excavations at Malé

Malé is, historically and today, the capital island of the Maldives; it is one of the world's most densely populated islands, and thus offered few prospects for a study of undisturbed remains. Accordingly we focused our attention on one of the only remaining open spaces, Sultans' Park, on which once stood the sultan's palace. In the summer of 1974 Carswell excavated two test pits inside and outside the line of the palace walls (inferred by reference to a 1921 map by HCP Bell), which produced some "limited stratigraphic evidence, and a few sherds" (Carswell 1975-1977: 144).

We set out two perpendicular lines on an area adjacent to the only remaining standing palace building and excavated seven 0.5x0.5m units along them (Figure 6). With the exception perhaps of the final unit, closest to the extant palace, all uncovered what seem to be rubble and destruction layers, with little stratigraphic integrity but plentiful structural remains (bricks, stones, plaster fragments) and small finds (metal objects, glass, and many cowrie shells, especially in one unit, N12, which we extended in size in order to determine whether we were faced with a hoard).

Excavations at Veyvah

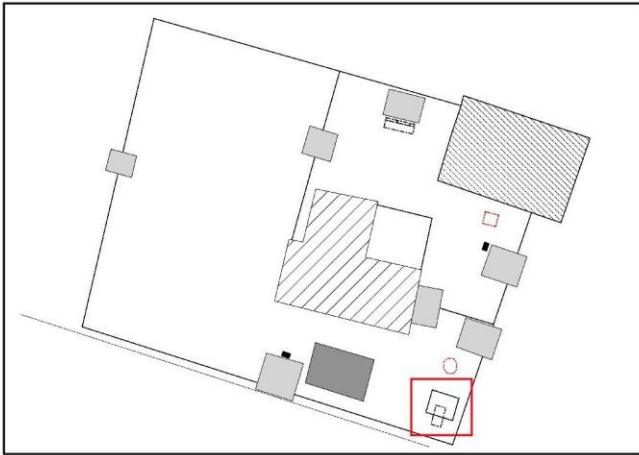
The island of Veyvah had been selected for investigation for two principal reasons: the presence on the island of an old (400 years?) coral stone mosque described as being in a remote part of the island and thus offering good prospects of undisturbed levels, and the geographical location of the island, south of Malé, giving us a good spread of locations tested. The island lies within the atoll of Mulaku (Meemu), which is mentioned by both ibn Majid and ibn Battuta, according to Tibbetts (2002). Our work involved the excavation of five test pits (Figure 7), of which Unit 5 was the most productive and will be discussed here.

This 1x1m test pit (Figure 8) was excavated on the side of the 'old road' which runs approximate-



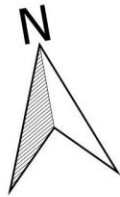
Figure 4: Utheemu 5 unit at set-up, cutting across kitchen wall.

UTH16-05: Skeleton



Feature

- Bone
- Grave cut
- Limit of Excavation
- Wall



0 0.1 0.2 0.3 0.4 0.5 m

1:10 at A4

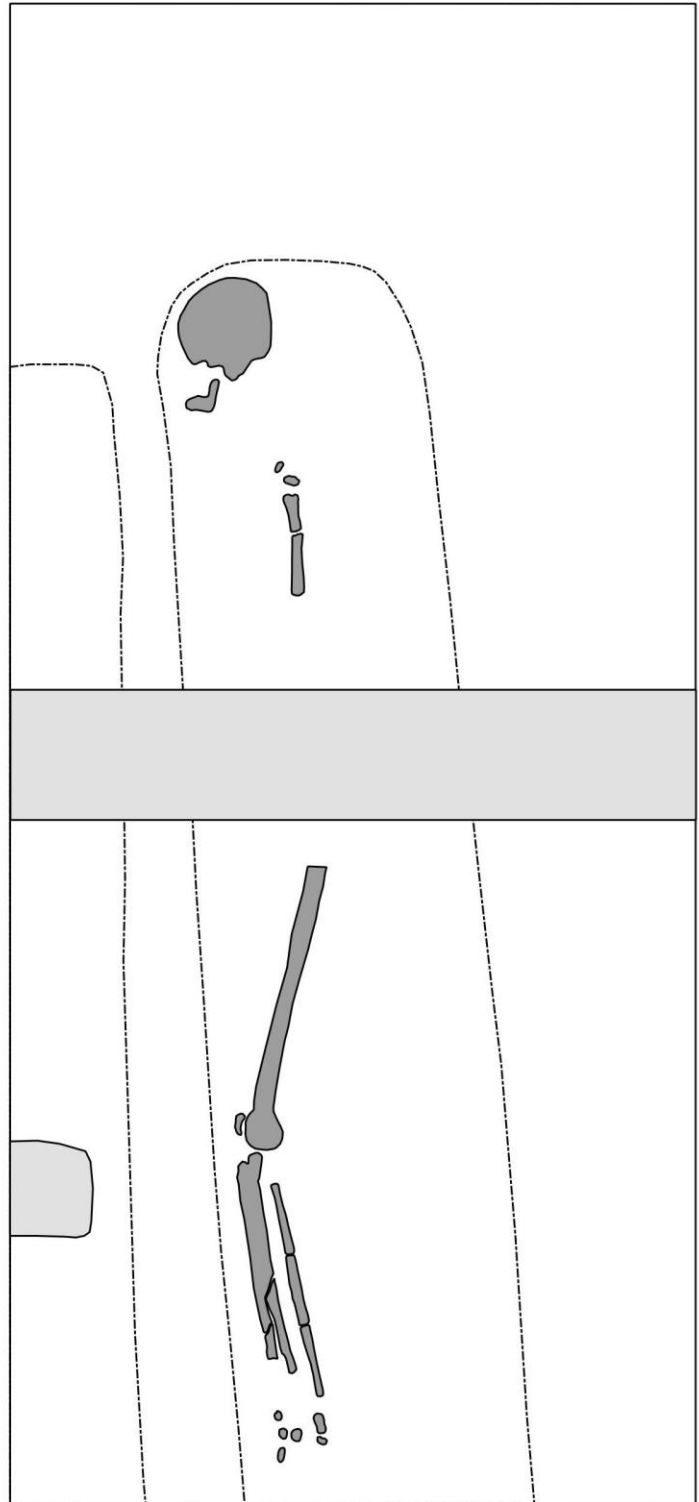


Figure 5: Utheemu 5 unit burial.



Figure 6: Malé Sultan Park – excavation of units underway.

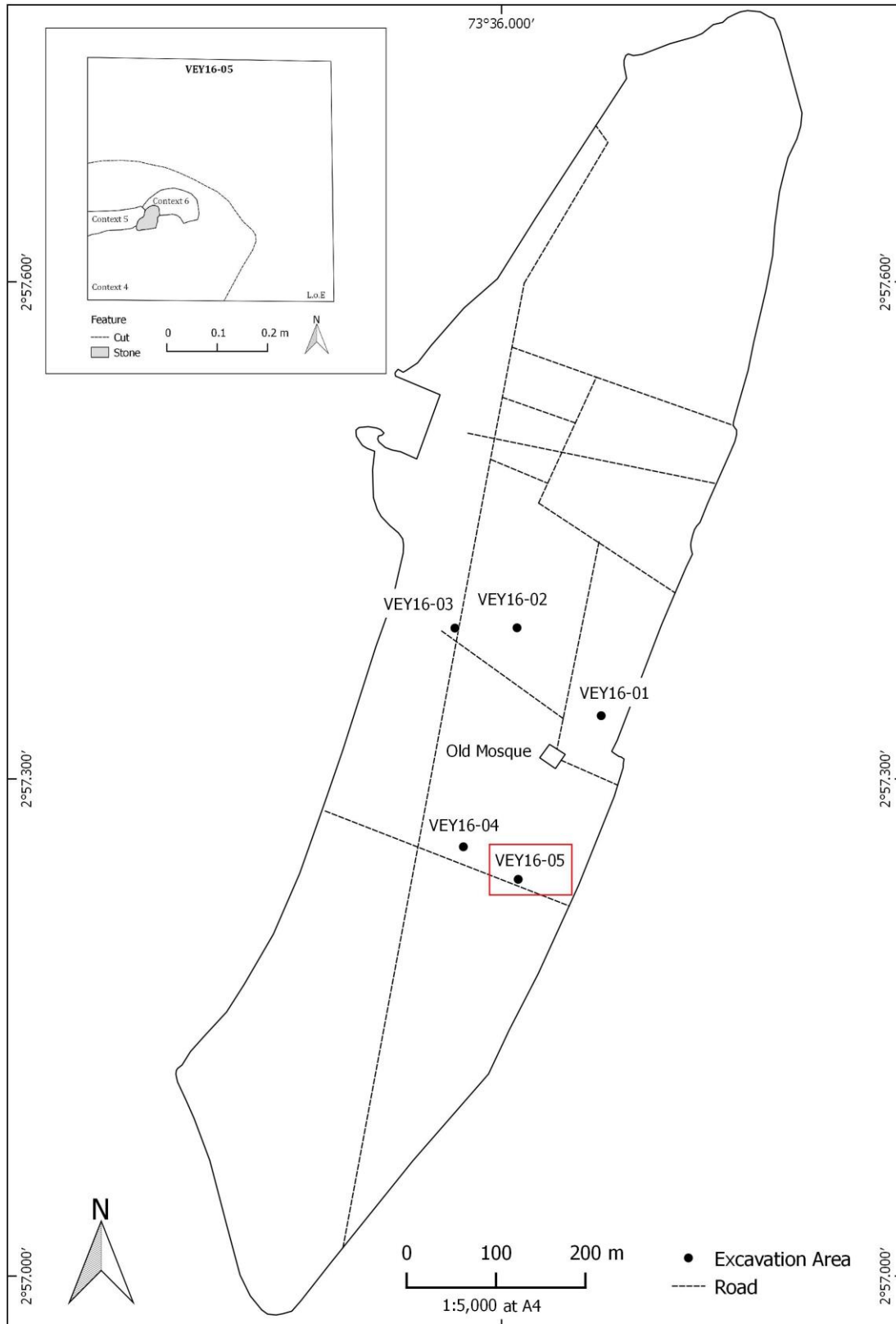


Figure 7: Plan showing units investigated on Veyvah island.



Figure 8: Veyvah 5 unit – general situation on the so-called ‘old road’.

ly east-west across the island to the south of the coral stone mosque. The trench was in proximity to the remains of another, potentially older, mosque now extensively covered by vegetation. A large scatter of pottery was also identified in the area.

Earthenware pottery, shells and bone were recovered throughout the trench with increasing density from Context 3. Shells and bone were particularly prevalent in the northeast and southwest corners - with pits identified in both areas. The southwest pit cut the natural soil and contained a strongly cemented feature. This overlaid a coarse-grey deposit that had a lot of large diagnostic earthenware sherds, many shells and numerous large fish bones. The lowermost layers within the pit were very compacted and difficult to excavate. A wet brown organic deposit was only partly excavated due to time constraints, and was sampled for further assessment. Two beads, appar-

ently glass, were recovered from the upper most fill of this pit in the southwest corner (Context 4). These are the only beads recovered from any of the excavations conducted in the Maldives this season.

The shell and bone assemblages from Veyvah 5 appear to be very different to those excavated in Utheemu and Malé, with details of the remains forthcoming. On initial observation, the bone assemblage appears to have a much higher proportion of complete fish bones (including large vertebra and cranial elements) many of which on first glance appear to have been from reef fish; this contrasts with the lower proportions of fish cranial elements from other sites. The shell assemblage also appears to have been more diverse – with *Eurosaria erosa* and *Palmdusta asselus* appearing in greater abundance than do *Cypraea moneta*, and much more frequently than they did in the other test pits. This is particularly in-

teresting in light of the etymological association with cowries of neighbouring (Boli) Mulah island, which is renowned for being associated with cowrie collection – generally assumed to have been *Cypraea moneta* (Ragupathy and Mohammed 2008)

Conclusion

Excavation at three islands of the Maldives enabled us to recover a good suite of materials. These include an assemblage of just under 5000 sherds, both coarse wares and diagnostic imported pottery (Chinese ceramics), which will form the cornerstone of Jaufar's thesis, shells (including cowries), metal objects (ferrous and cuprous), faunal remains (including a range of fish species), and charcoal (eight samples have been sent for dating). We have several questions relating to the cowrie assemblages themselves: at Utheemu palace for example, why were hoards only recovered in front of the northeast and southeast gates and not the north gate; was there a socio-symbolic significance to their position? To date, the front of the southeast gate has yet to be excavated – it is possible that another hoard might be located here that could help address some of these questions. Generally speaking, can archaeological excavation detect whether the shells were wrapped or placed in anything before burial, and is there evidence to suggest that hoards might have been added to or emptied at different periods?

As regards archaeological collections from West Africa, we have started the analysis of a collection of ~100 cowrie shells supplied by colleagues and arising from our own work. As this has followed from our study of shells in the collections of the Natural History Museum, London, we have been able to build our awareness of diagnostic features, and we are in the process of defining standardised taxonomic criteria (especially length ranges, teeth, and quantitative measures of shape) to distinguish *annulus* from *moneta* and other cowrie species. Questions we will be exploring in the next months include to what degree modifications made to cowries can serve as proxies for dating archaeological specimens from West Africa, and we will be growing our database

of West African archaeological cowries, developing a chrono-typology for the ceramics excavated in the Maldives, and exploring the relationship between gender and various cowrie species in their usage in West African ethnographic contexts.

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