

## Maldivian Seafaring in the Pre-Portuguese Period

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The settlers of the Maldives came from many lands, but in the battle for survival in difficult conditions, they melded together into one nation. In a country that is more sea than land, they learned to live in harmony with the ocean, developing a unique culture suitable to their environment. Oral traditions, evidence from archaeological sites, some available historical documents and foreign notices, serve to prove that in the past they were one of the most nautical of all the countries on the Indian Ocean rim. They learned to use the monsoon winds to their advantage during journeys to distant places. By the fourth century of the first millennium, they had navigational knowledge and sea-going craft which enabled them to undertake long voyages. The Maldivians discovered the money cowrie in their islands and used it for trade with neighbouring countries. Fishing was the main economic activity and the chief exports consisted of cowries, coir rope, fish, tortoise shell and ambergris. Boat-building became an art and a skill that earned them the attention of other countries, and a craft was developed that was unique to Maldives and yet accommodated useful features from other ship-building lands. The sea-going vessels were versatile enough to be adapted to all necessary conditions.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the tradition of Maldivian seafaring, up to the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century. With this objective in mind, we shall be looking at information from archaeological findings, oral traditions and historical records where these exist, and also from present-day Maldivian writers. Relevant foreign notices studied include very early records written by Amminanus Marcellinus, Ptolemy and an unknown Chinese author from the Chinese T'ang Dynasty period. Also included in this paper is material from Chinese author Ma Hwan who came to Maldives in 1414 with the fleet of Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho, and writings of Persian and Arab authors Sulaiman, Abu Zaid, Masudi, Idrisi and some others whose records contain relevant information on Maldives.

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