Maritime Asia Heritage Survey
A Database of Maritime Networks in Asia

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1. Introduction

Small island countries have faced a difficult challenge to manage their heritage sites and buildings since most sites rest in close proximity to the sea, exposing the sites to direct threats from rising sea levels, hurricanes, typhoons, and saltwater abrasion. The small size of the archaeological and historical remains has made them more prone to environmental hazards, not to mention the risks coming from large or intermittent social conflicts.

Heritage sites on small islands bear witness to complex trade routes and vast social networks that have spanned across oceans and continued for generations. Unlike archaeological and heritage sites located in the interior, coastal sites reflect cultural diversity, religious interaction, exchange network, hybrid identity, rapid social change, and dynamic political structure of people living at and frequenting the places. Protecting the heritage sites on small islands and coastal regions is an uneasy task, it needs to consider the limited capacity of local governments to develop a comprehensive measure that can protect the sites against environmental and social threats, and at the same time manage the sites as repositories for addressing memories of local sociocultural identities.

In 2008, UNESCO adopted the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) framework to accommodate specific situations faced by small island countries that include the challenge to develop an appropriate heritage management policy suited to small island and coastal contexts. Despite UNESCO's SIDS framework, implementing a concrete heritage management plan remains a difficult process for the state parties included in the SIDS platform.

2. Maritime Asia Heritage Survey (MAHS)[1]

The Maritime Asia Heritage Survey (MAHS) began as a pilot project in 2020 to make digital recordings of sites, buildings, artifacts, manuscripts, and oral histories in the Maldives and Aceh, Indonesia. Led by Prof. R. Michael Feener of Kyoto University and supported by the Arcadia Foundation, the MAHS Project seeks to help heritage management authorities to develop an open online platform to document, store, provide more information, and disseminate the information on the digitized materials to the public.

In the early stage of the project, the MAHS deploys an international survey team consisting of Maldivians and Indonesians. They work together in the field to take digital photogrammetry data, collect and scan manuscripts, record oral histories, and exchange knowledge of digital documentation techniques.

Until 2021, the MAHS has documented 1592 sites, created 24 3D models, digitized 220 manuscripts, and recorded 40 oral histories, all of them available on the project's website. The MAHS has created an online platform hosted at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University to store raw data, constructed 3D models, scanned manuscripts, records of oral histories, and additional references related to the sites, buildings, artifacts, and stories. All data, including the point-cloud data, is open to the public.

One of the topics that the MAHS has paid much attention to is Muslim material culture and how the maritime network facilitates the interactions among Muslim communities and

between Muslim communities and other religious communities in Asia. The MAHS survey in the Maldives reveals how the history of Muslim trade cannot be separated from the history of earlier settlements that had existed long before Muslim traders from the Middle East came to frequent the islands.[2]

The MAHS Project differs from other online databases that mostly focus on information about an individual building, a settlement site, or an artifact. The project bridges heritage management to knowledge construction. It offers an interpretive method to situate historical and archaeological sites on the coastal areas as nodal points in the vast maritime networks across oceans and regions in Asia. The project provides the required technological expertise to digitally record heritage sites and constructs a framework to link a recorded site to a large network of other sites on small islands and coastal regions. In highlighting social and cultural connections across national boundaries the MAHS Project situates the database in a complex historical narrative that transcends national interests.

The MAHS database platform develops a metadata structure to highlight the chronological and spatial connections between artifacts, buildings, and settlements found scattered across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. In so doing, the MAHS database platform allows users to learn how the documented and visualized artifacts, building structures, and texts are interconnected through maritime networks.

The MAHS organizes the database metadata to allow relational connections among different categories of information. The database and the platform act as a virtual social relation that users can draw to trace the movements and exchanges of materials, actors, ideologies, techniques, or spiritual values and norms. For example, by linking the information on the style of Arabic script found on tombstones to the script of a manuscript or crafted on religious buildings, the database users can use the script style to "visualize" the ancient network connecting religious communities, architects, poets, and political leaders.

In addition to the online platform, the field team also embodies and reenacts the spirit of connection and collaboration as reflected in the material cultures and oral histories documented in the project. The field team consists of Maldivians and Indonesians working together to take digital photogrammetry data, collect and scan manuscripts, and record oral histories. During the survey, the MAHS project has turned into a platform of real connection and exchange, not unlike the historical narrative that the project seeks to document, preserve, and visualize.

Heritage sites in the Maldives, a chain of low-lying islands in the Indian Ocean, face the risks of climate change and political conflicts. Documenting the heritage sites and artifacts in the Maldives, therefore, needs to be carried out not only to preserve the history of the islands but also the history of expansive social networks connecting the Middle East and the Indian peninsula to Southeast Asian and East Asian regions.

3. The Future of the MAHS Project

As of 2021, the MAHS has been and will be expanding its survey coverage to include coastal sites in Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka. The next stage will be documenting coastal heritage sites in Sumatra, Thailand, Brunei, and Vietnam, and integrating the visual and point-cloud data into the database platform hosted at Kyoto University. Upon completing the project in 2025, the project's website is expected to illustrate how documented archaeological sites, objects, manuscripts, and oral histories interconnect in maritime networks to bring people, goods, and ideas across Asia. As such, the MAHS project is not only important to help cultural heritage documentation and preservation, but it is also an innovative way to apply a specific interpretive framework to create a thematic database platform. Its interpretive framework is maritime history as the history of social and technological networks.

[Notes]
1) https://maritimeasiaheritage.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/
2) This report draws on information provided by R. Michael Feener at the 82nd International ARC Seminar held on April 14, 2021. https://www.arc.ritsumei.ac.jp/e/news/pc/007773.html

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