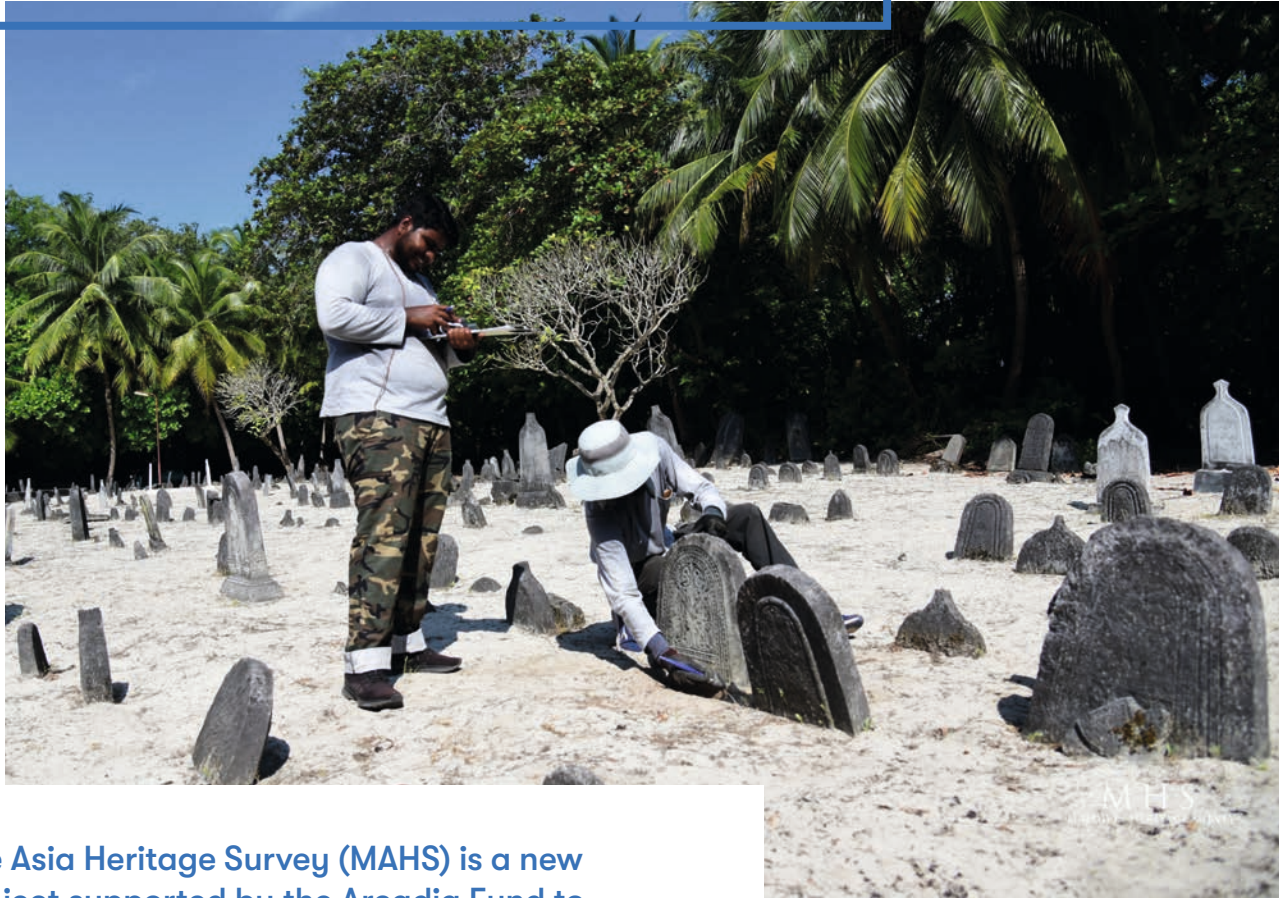


# The Maritime Asia Heritage Survey

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Below: The MAHS field team documenting coral-stone grave markers at an old Muslim cemetery on HA. Mulhadhoo in the Maldives.

The Maritime Asia Heritage Survey (MAHS) is a new five-year project supported by the Arcadia Fund to identify and document vulnerable heritage resources across maritime Southern Asia within an open-access and permanently preserved digital archive. The MAHS Project is a partnership between the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at Kyoto University, the Earth Observatory of Singapore (EOS) at Nanyang Technological University, and national-level institutions in each of the countries where we work.

The seasonal monsoon cycles of maritime Southern Asia have facilitated the circulation of people, materials, and ideas across a vast seascape over the past two millennia. The history of the region has been shaped by historically inter-connected societies stretching from the deserts of the Middle East and Indian sub-continent, to the jungles of island Southeast Asia and port cities along the Chinese coast. Complex maritime circulations of commerce and cultures created dynamics in which trans-regional cultural and religious traditions merged with unique local forms of expression, producing diverse forms of material culture. The history of the region has also been shaped by complex and often volatile environmental conditions, in which natural hazards have long posed significant challenges for peoples and polities across the region. Today, these same environmental pressures, coupled with the accelerating impacts of global climate change, pose potentially insurmountable challenges to the survival of the rich cultural heritage situated along Southern Asia's coasts, deltas, and archipelagoes. The Maritime Asia Heritage Survey is a new multi-national effort, supported by the Arcadia Fund (a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin), to document critically endangered cultural heritage in this region.

## Trans-regional cultural dynamics

Governments and donors have invested significant resources to preserve and document aspects of Asia's tangible,

intangible, and natural heritage. However, this work tends to favor sites that are boldly monumental, play important roles within national tourist economies, and/or fit within contemporary national (or nationalistic) narratives. This can be seen, for example, in the attention to large sites such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia and Hue City in Vietnam. Less attention has been allocated to document and preserve heritage sites of more modest scale that reflect the diverse experiences of local communities across this interconnected region.

The history of maritime interactions across much of Southern Asia is a history of sojourners and migrants that often complicates religious or ethno-nationalist heritage narratives and is thus often neglected or downplayed within the region. The heritage sites that reflect this are, moreover, difficult to preserve, manage, and study because of the inherent geographic decentralization across the borders of modern nation-states. Any effort to preserve this maritime heritage thus requires a multi-national scope and a range of local partnerships to engage with the material legacy of the trans-regional cultural dynamics produced by a constant stream of maritime interactions over the history of the region.

By definition, maritime sites are generally located in low-lying coastal areas and on deltas that are highly vulnerable to a combination of natural hazards, subsidence, and climate change. Major tsunamis, cyclones, floods, and earthquakes have devastated communities across maritime Asia. This has also resulted in extensive damage to cultural heritage – as we have extensively documented in parts of Indonesia hit by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.<sup>1</sup> Major river deltas in Asia are

rapidly eroding, and coastal urban areas are literally sinking as groundwater is depleted. It is estimated that climate change will increase sea-levels by between 1 and 3 meters by the end of this century, potentially inundating tens of thousands of square km, displacing millions of people, and further eroding the region's endangered cultural heritage.

To make matters worse, heritage sites in many parts of Asia are under immense pressure from rapid and largely unplanned development and urbanization. Historic neighborhoods have been razed or fundamentally altered to accommodate urbanization, while a wide slate of intangible cultural heritage and traditional practices are jeopardized by the rush to modernize. Finally, the rise of political, ethnic, and religious extremism has led to the desecration of heritage that belongs to a number of cultural communities that comprise minorities within the borders of modern nation-states. If the cultural heritage sites of these regions are not documented soon, they may be lost forever, along with the incalculable knowledge about the histories they embody.

## Documenting vulnerable heritage resources

The Maritime Asia Heritage Survey (MAHS) is a new five-year project supported by the Arcadia Fund to identify and document vulnerable heritage resources across maritime Southern Asia within an open-access and permanently preserved digital archive. The MAHS Project is a partnership between the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at Kyoto University, the Earth Observatory of Singapore (EOS) at Nanyang Technological University, and national-level institutions in Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

We are focusing on these five countries because together they present a rich inter-linked history of complex cultural circulations that are reflected in heritage sites vulnerable to a combination of environmental and human threats. The Maldives is a former Buddhist society that has over the past millennium become thoroughly Islamicized. Sri Lanka is predominantly Buddhist but still a remarkably diverse society including historically

significant populations of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Brunei presents a concentrated case study of a rich local heritage formed out of centuries of interaction between Chinese, Malay Muslim, and indigenous populations, while Vietnam provides the survey with coverage of a remarkable heritage of Cham Hinduism alongside rich histories of localized expressions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Indonesia has historically been one of the world's most dynamic locales of cultural interaction, situated as it is at the crux of maritime trade between the two great monsoon systems of Southern Asia. While today it is the world's most populous Muslim nation, its diverse heritage also reflects historical experiences of and interactions between Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese traditions, Christianity, and a great number of indigenous cultures. These countries provide an incredible wealth of material that has the potential to serve as a particularly rich resource for comparative study to deepen our understanding of the complex heritage of maritime Southern Asia in broader contexts.

In each of these countries, the MAHS works with our local partners to hire, equip, and train national survey teams to conduct full-time heritage survey and documentation. We will create, preserve and make open-access records of diverse and historically significant forms of material culture produced over centuries of commercial and cultural interactions across this region. Our in-country field teams deploy digital technologies including GPS/RTK (Real-Time Kinetic) mapping, digital photography, documentary video, oral history interviews, IIF (International Image Interoperability Framework) standard manuscript digitizations, CAD architectural plans and elevations, as well as aerial and terrestrial LiDAR to produce rich, multimedia documentation of sites in our survey area.

The MAHS combines this field documentation carried out by members of the project teams in each country and collaborative work with a range of existing initiatives across the region to integrate existing data sets into a new framework within a robust, user friendly, and stably preserved online archive. This will make a wealth of new material from multiple countries across the region available in open access, to facilitate the comparative study of the connected histories of these maritime Asian societies, as well as for use in heritage management programs and by local communities. The full project data set will also be permanently archived in the digital repositories of Kyoto University and the Bodleian Library's Oxford Research Archive. Large point-cloud files for LiDAR scans and photogrammetry will also be made available through Creative Commons licensing through <https://openheritage3d.org>. The MAHS digital archive can be accessed at: <http://maritimeasiaheritage.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp>.

## Participate

We are always open to considering new collaborations to enhance the digital documentation of heritage across the region both within and beyond the specific countries where fieldwork is currently underway. Interested organizations are welcome to contact us at: [MAHS@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp](mailto:MAHS@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp).

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## Notes

- 1 Patrick Daly et al. 2019. 'Archaeological Evidence that a late 14th-century Tsunami Devastated the Coast of Northern Sumatra and Redirected History', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 116.22; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1902241116>