

## **Developing research and infrastructure in Sri Lankan maritime archaeology: Galle Harbour**

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Underwater exploration carried out in Galle Harbour, southern Sri Lanka, by the Joint Sri Lanka-Australian Maritime Archaeology Programme, in three seasons of research during 1992, 93 and 96, have provided archaeological evidence which corroborates and complements literary-source based knowledge of the port of Galle. The investigations have revealed no identifiable trace of any coastal fishing communities in the locality, possibly due to the scarcity, perishable nature and deep burial of artefactual finds of the earlier period. The finds collected by surface survey and preliminary underwater excavation witness the use of the harbour by oceanic traders, travellers, sailors, soldiers and local fishermen, from at least the 12th/13th centuries up to the present date.

The evidence tallies with two phases of the port's involvement with Indian Ocean maritime commerce. The first is its participation in the accelerated regional and trans-oceanic network of pre-modern Asian trade in the Late Medieval Period, developing from around the 12th century, and reaching its peak in the 15th/16th centuries. A handful of diagnostic Chinese porcellanous stoneware finds and a sherd of glazed earthenware from the Red Sea region belong to this period, with corroboratory evidence from Islamic and Chinese literary records.

The second phase portrays the advent and development of European trade and political hegemony in the Indian Ocean region from the early 16th century, followed by the gradual dwindling of the Asian trade. Although no finds attributable to the Portuguese have been recovered so far from the harbour exploration, their presence in Galle dates from the landing of the Portuguese in the island in 1505, at the Point of Galle. There is no dearth of finds from the 17th-19th centuries, with Dutch and especially British shipwrecks. These are associated with Far Eastern and European ceramics and European glass artefacts, representing an era when commodities carried by the previous Asian trade from various supplying locations bordering the Indian Ocean, as well as the new wave of European goods were transported and traded by Dutch, British and other European shipping visiting the port of Galle.

The finds from the three seasons of harbour exploration provide testimony for the potential of maritime archaeology research in Sri Lanka; of the variety of information available to reconstruct the island's maritime cultural ethos. The infrastructural issues which need to be addressed in developing maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka are also discussed, in relation to the Galle Harbour experience.