



Newsletter 4, Galle Heritage Reconstruction Project

2 February 2005

Introduction

Gradually the focus of our work is changing from first aid and information-gathering towards planning for rehabilitation. Robert Parthesius visited Sri Lanka last week to discuss possibilities to assist with the reestablishment of the Maritime Archaeological Unit and the Maritime Museum and the development of other heritage projects in Galle. In general terms his mission was to investigate how culture can contribute to the rehabilitation of Galle and the region as an important destination for national and international cultural tourism. The formal request for assistance to restore this UNESCO World Heritage Site by Hon. Minister of Cultural Affairs, Mr. Vijitha Herath to the Netherlands Embassy creates a basis for substantial international assistance.

The Central Cultural Fund/Mutual Heritage Centre will work out a short-term plan of action until June. Pending funding, they hope to assess damage to the heritage sites in Galle (including the maritime sites), to re-establish basic infrastructure for the Maritime Archaeological Unit (also needed to assess damage to the sites underwater), to undertake rescue conservation on the heritage sites and recovered archaeological collections, and to formulate long term plans for rehabilitation and development.

The Netherlands Cultural Fund has agreed to assist in this first stage of the work and funded an expert mission to Galle in March. Experts in various fields will assist the Sri Lankan teams. Other funds have been approached to assist in the reestablishment of basic infrastructure for this stage. Support from colleagues and institutes is essential for reestablishment of the heritage programme in Galle. Donations and letters of support gave a tremendous boost to morale for the teams in Sri Lanka.

The situation in Galle, a month after the disaster, is improving but still difficult. It is good to see how many people are trying to pick up the pieces and rebuild their lives. We have to keep in mind that many are still living under very poor conditions. The focus on direct humanitarian support should not waver. We can try to help develop parts of the infrastructure for the future. During recent tsunami alarms after new earthquakes, the fort was a popular shelter. We hope that the world heritage site of Galle will serve the country in many more ways during the difficult rehabilitation phase ahead.



The entrance of the MAU after the Tsunami



Homeless in Unawatuna on the remains of their house

Plans till June 2005

At a meeting on 28 January in Galle a short-term action plan was discussed. It was decided not to return to the former location outside the old city gate. Possible new legal restrictions on building near the beach and the preference of the team for higher ground led us to the former Dutch Hospital in the fort. In this historical complex, recently handed over to the Archaeological Department, the Galle Heritage Foundation is located, but there will be enough space to house the MAU and the team. As a preference for the MAU's new building we have identified a building at the entrance on the ramparts next to Akersloot bastion. This building suffered some damage by the Tsunami (5-7 metres above sea level!), but it will be ideal for offices, library, storage and workshops. We hope that the collapsed part of the building can be rebuilt as a well-equipped laboratory. Although the hope is that the MAU will be housed in the restored Dutch Warehouse in the future, these facilities will serve also for the proposed UNESCO regional training centre.

It is important that the team return to Galle as soon as possible. The problem is accommodation; with many thousand homeless it will be impossible to find regular housing. Therefore we hope to create living quarters for the team in the main building of the Dutch hospital; they will need support for the cost of living since prices have tripled in Galle.

Pending availability of funds, renovation and preparation of this new MAU will start in the course of February. In March we hope to move in and bring the recovered collection back into conservation and storage. We will also move the conservation tank with the cannon and anchors to these facilities.



The National Maritime Museum

The galleries of the National Maritime Museum in the Dutch warehouse were completely destroyed. Dr Nanda Wickremasinghe (director department of national museums) has requested assistance in the reestablishment of the museum.

We hope to develop plans to reopen some galleries at the end of 2005. These galleries could also include a maritime archaeological section, and background and effect of the tsunami.

Pending the restoration of the Dutch Warehouse, we might consider the Dutch Hospital as a temporary location for the new Maritime Museum.

Above right: the former Dutch Hospital.

Left the proposed new location of the MAU next to the hospital

Symbolic restart of the MAU

To show the commitment to safeguard the future of Maritime Archaeology for Sri Lanka the first six dive cylinders have been handed over to the MAU. It is clear that this tangible contribution to the restart was a morale boost for the team. They were also very pleased with the many letters of support received from all corners of the world.

The team will concentrate in the coming weeks on cleaning the former site of the MAU and preparing for the March fieldwork. Another priority is the unearthing and repair of the boat. We hope to have enough equipment by March to resume diving and to inspect the damage to the Avondster site and other maritime heritage sites in the bay.



The symbolic restart of the MAU on the buried boat

The Maritime Archaeological Collection

A first inventory has been made of the recovered collection. Donated laptops gave the team access to the databases. Based on first observations and comparison with the database by Gamini Saman and Hans Bonke it is estimated that 20-30% of the collection has been recovered.

A start has been made on putting the finds back in water. The health risk of breeding mosquitos is still imminent. In March we hope to bring out proper containers which can be sealed. In March, Ian Godfrey and other conservators will help the team to re-establish conservation treatment.



The recovered maritime archaeological collection

Damage to the monuments in Galle fort

A first visual inspection by Hemantha Balachandra (director of the Mutual Heritage Centre), Robert Parthesius and Hans Bonke revealed damage to the ramparts on the east and west side of the fort. A more thorough inspection is required to determine old and new deterioration and the urgency of the situation. Near Flag Point, the landfill behind the rampart walls was washed away. Apart from collapsed buildings on the ramparts, no other damage was visible to the monuments in the fort. In March, the effect of the seawater on the historic plaster will be assessed. Harry Boerema and Patricia Meehan will assist the Mutual Heritage Centre at that occasion in making a detailed assessment of the damage.



*Left: Rampart on the west side. Right: partly collapsed wall and building at the eastside.
Below: Hole in the landfill behind the rampart wall at the SW side of the fort.*



Heroes of the MAU

That some equipment and artefacts were recovered is partly due to the swift reactions by the staff present during the disaster. Between the first and second tsunami, the four staff members present at the CCF office in the Dutch Warehouse risked their lives by returning to the unit to secure the compressor, water dredge and outboard engines. This equipment has been saved and is under repair for the restart of diving.

The day after the tsunami, the MAU cleaner started to collect the archaeological finds scattered over the area. On his pushbike he chased artefacts picked up by others. He was proudly featured in the newspaper.



Colophon

Initiative:
Galle Heritage Reconstruction Project.

Editors:
Robert Parthesius
Miranda Vos
Ninke Bloemberg
Christine Ketel
Claire Barnes

Contact and further information:

e-mail: avondster@xs4all.nl
website avondster- project: <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/galle/>

Recent Photo's on the situation In Galle and Unawatuna on <http://miranda.vos.net/>