Towards an Atlas of Maritime Buddhism: Cultural Datasets and Content Provision for Sri Lanka and Mainland Southeast Asia

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In the first few centuries BC and AD, the introduction of Indian religions to Southeast Asia was a catalyst for change and a key driver of the development of complex societies in the region. Continued interactions over the following millennium, including the exchange of religious ideas, helped shape the cultural trajectories of Southeast Asian civilisations. Much attention has been paid to the transmission of material and ideas across the overland "Silk Routes"; however, comparatively little attention has been paid to cultural exchanges and interactions along its maritime equivalent. Recently a working group has been formed with a view to developing an Atlas of Maritime Buddhism, which seeks to address this deficit by collating a range of relevant cultural datasets into a digital cultural atlas, focusing on the transfer of Buddhist devotees, ideas and material culture across the Bay of Bengal and on to China via maritime trading routes. The final product, hosted at Academia Sinica in Taiwan, will be used to provide multimedia content for museum exhibitions and also as a research tool. This paper will present an overview of existing digital cultural datasets for the areas of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia that could be incorporated into the Atlas, for example country-wide registers of archaeological sites. The paper will also present a series of case studies where existing scholarly research on individual sites, for example Angkor, could provide rich content for multimedia displays. Finally, the paper will provide an overview of similar collaborations undertaken in the past within the framework of the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI), and discuss the various challenges presented by a collaborative project dealing with distributed databases of heterogeneous cultural data.