Making Buddhist Kingdoms, 1200-1500

During this period, Buddhist contact intensified between locations in Lanka (now Sri Lanka) and the Tai, Mon, and Burmese areas of mainland Southeast Asia. The combined effects of a new regime of trade in the Indian Ocean and rapidly shifting political formations along its shores spurred the circulation of Buddhist intellectuals (often Buddhist monks) across the ocean, in court-sponsored embassies and independent monastic missions. Just as the Lankan Buddhist world entered a phase of unprecedented institutional instability and intellectual creativity, Southeast Asian Buddhists increasingly sought Lankan Buddhist texts and monastic ordination lineages for their home territory. 

Making Buddhist Kingdoms will reveal the deep trans-regional connections among histories of Buddhist place-making and the establishment of Buddhist-oriented polities in the western and southwestern regions of Lanka, north-central Tai lands, and Mon-Burmese territory. Making Buddhist Kingdoms will contribute to the development of a more dynamic history of pre-modern Buddhism in Lanka, portray a world of maritime Buddhism during a time of quickening sea-trade along the Indian Ocean, and call attention to the textual power of place and imagined geography in Buddhist arguments for territorial and institutional authority. My research relates to wider conversations about (1) how to understand the relationship between “religion” and “politics” in eras when they were not conceptually distinguished by their participants; (2) the textual power of place and imagined geographies in shaping and authorizing collective affiliation/identification; and (3) the pre-colonial and pre-national interaction of religious traditions now often understood as alien and opposed (such as Islam and Buddhism).