16. Historical Atlas of South India and Heritage Management

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Abstract

The Digital Historical Atlas of South India, which is available on the website of the French Institute of Pondicherry (FIP) for the past one decade, was primarily meant to be used as an educational tool in teaching history. It has, however, a lot of potential for educating laymen as well as specialists in the rich cultural heritage of South India. Its inbuilt query system provides much scope for various pedagogic uses. This is explained in this paper with reference to the mapping of religious centres.

Keywords: Digital Archaeology; Heritage Management; Historical Atlas of South India; Heritage Documentation

Teaching history using maps is a usual pedagogic procedure. Hence historical atlas is a convenient tool for history teachers and students. There exist several printed versions of historical atlases for Europe, North America, Canada, China and Southeast Asia. For example, for India and the neighbouring countries we have a monumental work, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, edited by J.E. Schwartsberg and published by University of Chicago Press in 1978. Then there are such special works as the *Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (1982) by Irfan Habib, and the recent publication of *Atlas of Ancient Indian History* (2012) by Irfan Habib and Faiz Habib and *An Annotated Archaeological Atlas of West Bengal* (2005) by B.D. Chattopadhyaya and others.

Web-based digital atlas, is, however, a recent development even in Western countries, like *the Digital Atlas of Roman and Medieval Civilizations*. As far as India is concerned, the first successful venture is *the Historical Atlas of South India* (from prehistoric times to CE 1600), which was produced by the French Institute of Pondicherry in collaboration with four South Indian Universities, namely Tamil University of Thanjavur, Mahatma Gandhi University of Kottayam, University of Mangalore and the Central University of Hyderabad.

A big team of historians, archaeologists and geographic information system (GIS) experts was involved in the preparation of the atlas during 2005–2008. The digital version of this atlas was launched in late 2008 and is now available on the website of the French Institute of Pondicherry (http://www.ifpindia.org/hatlas/).

The atlas was prepared using the latest GIS technology. Its geographical coverage includes present states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and two pilot areas in the states of formerly Andhra Pradesh (now Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Karnataka. It covers the time range from prehistoric times to AD 1600 and is organised into seven major periods and under four major knowledge themes (political, social, economic and cultural). Altogether, there are at present 7000 sites of archaeological and historical importance put on the maps with all the related theme-based information. Facilities are provided to navigate through, and interact with, by querying, the entire database by time, space and themes. Maps have been illustrated by two different versions, namely Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) version and Google Earth version.

The atlas holds a great potential for educating laymen as well as specialists in the rich cultural heritage of South India. Its inbuilt query system has much scope for various pedagogic uses. This may be explained with reference to the mapping of religious centres. Information relating to the religious centres of various creeds like Saiva, Vaishnava, Jaina or Buddha in Tamil Nadu and Kerala is available from the 7th century onwards both from literary and archaeological sources. Those centres have undergone changes by way of expansion, renovation and also desertion over the centuries. While many of them have survived through some structural remains like temples, many have also disappeared due to neglect and other reasons. Some of these latter centres, however, can be recognised through some stray archaeological evidence like loose sculptures and also by way of place names. As the primary objective of the atlas is to understand and explain the historical changes, care has been taken to map the spots of all archaeological data, including loose and stray sculptures, without reference to their superficial importance. As far as the digital atlas is concerned any

number of points, representing the ancient sites, may be put on the maps without the problem of cluttering. This is because the digital maps, unlike the printed maps, can be zoomed in to a large extent without loss of details. In the Pudukkottai area, where a thorough survey was made before mapping, sites of loose sculptures were also recorded. Interestingly many of these sculptures belong to non-orthodox creeds, Jaina and Buddha, indicating the popularity of those creeds in the past society (prior to the 12th century) of the locality (Map 1). That means they are part of the cultural heritage of the area. If we go only by the surviving structural remains, this important heritage would have never seen the light of day.

Compared to the Pudukkottai area, the map of the Kaveri delta included in the atlas does not show any Jaina and Buddha centres (Figs. 1 and 2), whereas it is seemingly rich in the orthodox religious centres. The reason is the problem of insufficient documentation. No record of stray sculptures was systematically made for this area as in the case of the Pudukkottai area (Fig. 3.). Such stray sculptures are, however, found in the Kaveri delta and in other areas too. In view of their importance, they have been documented in the last couple of years by the researchers of the French Institute of Pondicherry. They have to be added thereafter to the Historical Atlas as they corroborate the evidence from inscriptions, which vouch for the popularity of the Buddha and Jaina religions in the medieval period, say up to the 11th century. It is found that by 11th century the non-orthodox religions lost much of the earlier royal patronage. Several land gifts that had been in the possession of the *Paḷḷi*s (Jaina and Buddha religious centres) are found to be resumed (denoted by the term *tiṟappu*) and converted for other purposes.[1] Those religions seem to have been abandoned or ignored thereafter due to changed socio-political circumstances, which of course would require an independent study. Anyway, the above information supports the fact that the Historical Atlas provides much scope for understanding the vicissitudes of religious and cultural heritage over time.

1. There are several references to this aspect in the 11th-century Chola copper-plate grants, like the Karandai grant. K.G. Krishnan, ed., *Karandai Tamil Sangam Plates of Rajendra Chola I*, New Delhi: ASI, 1984, pp. 212–213.
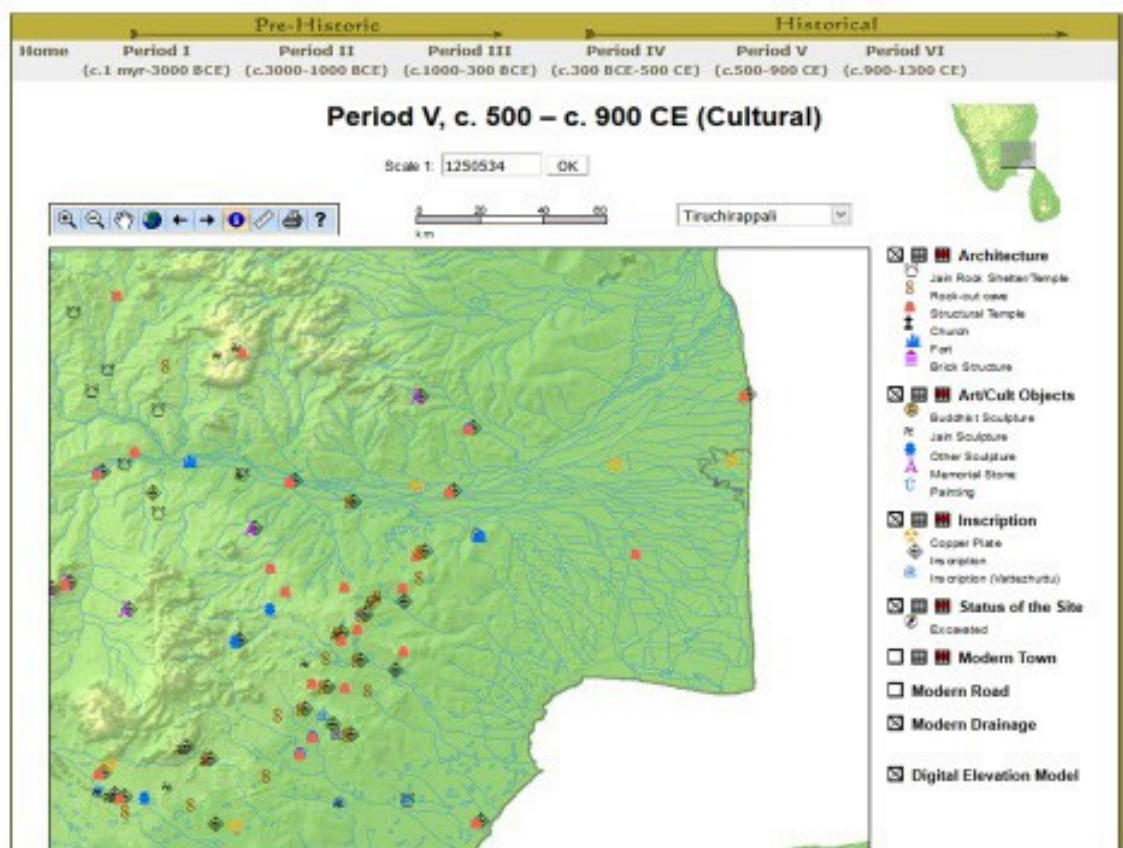
Fig 1. Jaina centres in the Pudukkottai area (Source : author)
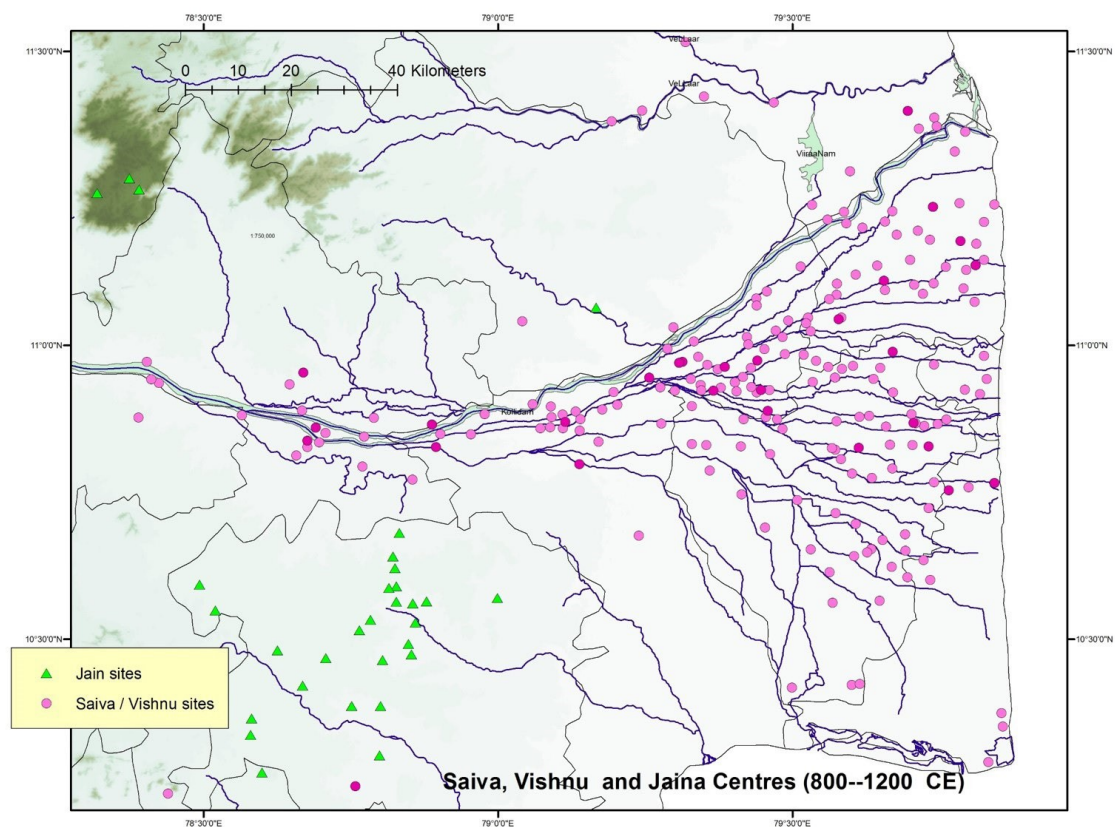
Fig. 2. Religious centres in the Pudukkottai area and the Kaveri Delta. (Source : author)

*Fig. 3. Loose sculptures of Jaina and Buddha affiliation
(in Pudukkottai area) (Source : author).*