



## A Historical Atlas of Tibet

Author: Mills, Martin A.

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 36(3) : 389

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm184>

---

BioOne Complete ([complete.BioOne.org](https://complete.BioOne.org)) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at [www.bioone.org/terms-of-use](https://www.bioone.org/terms-of-use).

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

---

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

## A Historical Atlas of Tibet

By Karl E. Ryavec. Chicago, IL:  
Chicago University Press, 2015. xvii  
+ 202 pp. US\$ 45.00. ISBN 978-0-  
226-73244-2. Also available as an e-  
book. US\$ 27.00. ISBN 978-0-226-  
24394-8.

Historical atlases are one of the hardest things to do in scholarly terms, requiring an encyclopedic grasp of a huge range of issues, and are made doubly hard when the object of concern is a highly contested region, the subject of multiple overlapping sovereign histories, and the subject of a vast mythopoetic historiography. This is the task of Karl Ryavec's *Historical Atlas of Tibet*, and it is unsurprising that it took the author some 20 years to complete. The result is a rich and informative reference work, an essential addition to the shelves of any Tibetologist, historical scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, or indeed historian of China, and the rewarding focus of many hours of study.

The work as a whole is definitely written with such a scholarly audience in mind, one already familiar with much of Tibetan history and orthography. The text generally uses the Wylie transcription system, attended, in the case of important sites, by the standard Tibetan phonetics system employed by the Tibetan and Himalayan Library. The sites mentioned in the work can be checked for orthography and further information through the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre (TBRC.org).

Inevitably, the *Atlas* is organized primarily into historical epochs, using the now almost canonical division of the Tibetan Plateau's political history: the prehistorical and ancient periods (part 1, 30,000 BC to AD 600), including the rise of the Zhangzhung confederacy; the imperial period (part 2, AD 600 to 900) of the Yarlung dynasty, including the first diffusion of Buddhism to Tibet; the period of disunion (part 3,

AD 900 to 1642), including the second diffusion, Mongol/Sakya overlordship, and Pakmodru hegemony; the Ganden Podrang period (part 4, AD 1642 to 1951) of the ruling Dalai Lamas; and the contemporary moment under the People's Republic of China. The most substantial of these are parts 3 and 4, and it is good to see a fine-tuned focus on the plateau's "outlying" regions of Kham, Amdo, and Ngari, each of whose political and religious complexities get numerous dedicated maps. It is also particularly pleasing to see the attention paid to the Guge kingdom, the Tantra school of Rinchen Zangpo, and the Pakmodru.

The maps themselves are generally extremely dense, requiring detailed and careful study. They are well produced, usually in rich color, but often containing a sometimes ungainly mass of information. This embarrassment of riches would be one of my main criticisms of the *Atlas*: the periphery of most of the maps is broken up by small continents of text boxes, containing extended listings of key sites according to the multiple historical sources that the author deploys. Here we see much of what makes this work possible now rather than 20 years ago, benefiting immeasurably from the scholarship of key modern historians of Tibet (particularly regarding the pre-Ganden Podrang period), from Per Sorensen, John Bellezza, Brandon Dotson, and Guntram Hazod to the late Guge scholar Tsering Gyalpo, among many others. The author's faithful endeavor to bring on board the accumulated cartographic results of these scholars (indigenous Tibetan historical sources themselves having a profound penchant for geographical lists, many of which conflict with one another) has resulted in their being laid out across the maps in a manner that often makes studying them confusing to the eye (map 14 being, I think, the most egregious example). In this regard, the potential buyer would be advised at least to purchase the print rather than the electronic version of this work: the maps are

simply too filled with minutiae to be studied effectively on even a large desktop screen. The print version is much more manageable in this regard, but even then I would be minded to suggest that any hoped-for future editions would be wiser using the page sizing of something like *The Lhasa Atlas* (Larsen and Sinding-Larsen 2001) and moving the lists to the side, or even to appendices.

The many maps are interspersed with well-informed short essays on the social and political conditions of each period. In the first part, these discuss the methodological challenges associated with such a project: how exactly does one map the economic history of an agropastoral society? What indicators does one use? How does one designate regions and macroregions? In much of this, Ryavec takes monastic founding as a key index of both economic growth and societal and state integration, a stance for which there is considerable ethnographic and historical support.

Overall, this is a worthy and important edition to Tibetan and Himalayan studies, one intended very much for the initiated scholar of the region. It is a work that requires some patience to get through, and those with access to the sources that it uses will gain the best of it, because it quite literally provides a route map into those texts and aids greatly in making sense of them. In this regard, any serious course on Tibetan history could make good use of it.

## REFERENCE

Larsen K, Sinding-Larsen A. 2001. *The Lhasa Atlas: Traditional Tibetan Architecture and Townscape*. Chicago, IL: Serindia.

## AUTHOR

Martin A. Mills

m.a.mills@abdn.ac.uk

Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research,  
University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3QY,  
United Kingdom

© 2016. Mills. This open access article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Please credit the authors and the full source.