

Knowledge, Science and Empire: The Exploration and Visualization of Tibet, c. 1850

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The acquisition of knowledge about Tibetan topography and society was a major goal for a variety of actors such as British imperial functionaries, European missionaries, traders, botanists and geologists, in the mid-nineteenth century. In this paper I examine a set of drawings in the British Library's Wise Collection, once described by Michael Aris "as the most ambitious pictorial survey of Tibetan topography and culture ever attempted by a local artist." The drawings were commissioned by William Edmund Hay (1805-1879), an assistant commissioner in Kulu in the Western Himalaya, and executed by a still unidentified Tibetan monk.

It is hard to assign the drawings in the set to a single genre. The significant number of picture maps invites one to regard the set as primarily cartographic. However, since it also contains ethnographic details as well as information about flora and fauna, I argue that it represents an "ethnographic" atlas. Numerous related drawings in the Wise Collection represent monastic rituals, different kinds of ceremonies and explanatory notes. Due to this wealth of information I argue that the Wise Collection as a whole should be regarded as a "compendium" of knowledge about Tibet. My presentation will be organized through the following questions: How did the Europeans who commissioned such work and the indigenous artists who carried it out collaborate and interact? How were local conventions of representation influenced by European norms of content and style? How was the emic knowledge of a Tibetan monk codified and transmitted by a Scot?