

John Vincent Bellezza. *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. xi + 347 pp.

John Vincent Bellezza's lifelong project to explore and document the religion and culture of Tibet's earliest, pre-Buddhist civilization, is uniquely ambitious. In a series of publications he has used the techniques of archaeology, anthropology and textual scholarship to shed light on this world, obscured as it is by the passage of time and the dominance of Buddhism in Tibetan culture for the last thousand years. Bellezza is particularly interested in the civilization known to Tibetan tradition as Zhang Zhung, which was based in western Tibet, also known as Upper Tibet.

The kingdom of Zhang Zhung appears in Tibet's traditional histories as the enemies of the Tibetan Pugyal kingdom, which expanded its reach under the emperor Songtsen Gampo to include the whole of the Tibetan plateau, as well as swathes of minor Himalayan and Central Asian kingdoms. The *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, a bardic song cycle describing the victory of the Pugyal emperors over their enemies, tells the story of a princess from the Pugyal house who was married to the king of Zhang Zhung; deeply unhappy with her marriage, she began working as a spy, and informed Songtsen Gampo when the king of Zhang Zhung was away from his castle. Songtsen Gampo's successful attack on the castle is said to have brought all of Upper Tibet under his sway. And while the *Chronicle* is no sober historical document, there is little doubt that the kingdoms of Upper Tibet were indeed conquered by the Tibetan empire.

Tibet's Bonpo religion emerged in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the runaway success of Buddhism in Tibet, incorporating the old rituals of pre-Buddhist Tibet with much Buddhist doctrine and practice, with a few alterations in symbolism and language. For the Bonpos, Zhang Zhung became a mythical lost home, the source of their teachings, which were said to have been translated from the lost Zhang Zhung language (though the original source is located in a region called Tazig, sometimes identified with Iran). Bonpo histories told similar stories to the Buddhist ones, but inverted them, making the Pugyal emperors the villains and the kings of Zhang Zhung the heroes. Thus in Tibet, Zhang Zhung is at the centre of an alternative history, as an Atlantean lost civilization from which came the best of Tibet's religion and culture.

Bellezza's *modus operandi* is not archeological excavation. He travels widely, finding sites that have not

been previously explored, and documents them. Thus his publications are surveys of large numbers of sites, which, along with his work on textual sources, form the basis for his theories about the ancient culture of Upper Tibet. Such an approach, similar to that of late 19<sup>th</sup> century explorers such as Sven Hedin, might be considered outdated or amateurish, but offers much of value in the little known areas which Bellezza has chosen to explore.

Bellezza's travels in Tibet began in the 1980s, but his organized expeditions date from the late '90s onwards. His first major study based on these expeditions was *Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilization in Tibet*, published in 1997 by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in India. Further accounts of his finds appeared in two volumes simultaneously published in 2002, *Antiquities of Northern Tibet* and *Antiquities of Upper Tibet*, again by an Indian publisher. Bellezza's move into mainstream academic discourse and publishing was marked by the appearance of his book *Calling Down the Gods*, published by E.J. Brill and bringing new textual and anthropological research to his already extensive archaeological work.

The most significant of Bellezza's publications is *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet*, which was published in 2008 by the Austrian Academy of Sciences. This monumental work is in three parts, the first detailing the author's explorations of ruins, caves and other sites in Upper Tibet, with photographs of key features, especially ancient cave paintings and graffiti, and discussion of artefacts found at these sites. In the second and third parts Bellezza links these discoveries with the textual tradition, based on early manuscript sources and the literature of the Bonpo tradition; part two deals with the Zhang Zhung royal cults, and part three with funerary traditions.<sup>1</sup>

*The Dawn of Tibet* is essentially a synthesis of Bellezza's previous work, particularly his *Zhang Zhung*, into a form intended to be accessible to the general reader. The book begins with an introduction to Bellezza's personal history of exploration in Tibet. He mentions briefly the work of others, including Chinese archaeological expeditions, and the work of American archaeologist John Aldenderfer, but it would have been good to have more information here on how Bellezza's work fits in with that of these archaeologists, es-

pecially the Chinese teams who have been involved in significant digs in Western Tibet in recent years. In any case, Bellezza's work in Upper Tibet has been extensive, and the documentation of his finds has become increasingly systematic. As he states, he has documented around seven hundred sites containing monuments, rock art, or both, and this work forms the basis for the theories about the history and culture of Zhang Zhung that he relates later in the book.

Before that point, the second and third chapters are an introduction to the geography and people of Upper Tibet, with particular focus on the *drokpa*, the tent-dwelling people who live by herding yaks, sheep and goats. Bellezza briefly summarizes his anthropological observations from his time spent among the *drokpa*. Their shamanic practices, performed by ritual specialists known as *lhapa*, have some interesting similarities with the ancient practices found in Upper Tibet. In the fourth chapter Bellezza introduces a historical account of the Zhang Zhung kingdom, based on the literature of the Bonpo school, mythological stories of culture heroes that are dubious sources for the modern historian; nevertheless, Bellezza links these stories in interesting ways with the peoples and sites of Upper Tibet.

In the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters Bellezza summarises his work on the ruined castles and temples of Upper Tibet, burial grounds, and the rock paintings and artefacts that he has documented at these sites. These chapters are, by necessity, densely packed, bringing together the several hundreds of pages of Bellezza's previous reports. The amount of information gathered and systematized here is admirable, and will no doubt inform future work in this area. Yet these chapters also highlight how little we know about the practices of which these monuments and artefacts were once a part, as Bellezza acknowledges.

In the eighth and ninth chapters, Bellezza turns to the texts in earnest, bringing together the literature of the Bonpos with texts for funerals and other rituals preserved in the Dunhuang manuscripts. These texts do describe practices, which can tentatively be connected with ancient sites and artefacts, and the practices of spirit possession in particular seem to have survived to some extent, or at least to be connected with similar practices among the contemporary *drokpa* of Upper Tibet. In the tenth chapter, Bellezza attempts to draw together the threads of past and present.

There are certainly dangers in this ambitious project, and one finds in Bellezza's text a number of leaps of faith, statements such as the following, on a narrative from a Dunhuang manuscript: "Unmistakeably, this Pt 1136 origin tale alludes to a prehistoric phase in the culture of Upper Tibet" (p. 235). But the fact that the text in this manuscript refers to the practices of an-

cient times is no guarantee that it is a reliable witness to them. Texts such as these were not written to help the modern historian or archaeologist reconstruct the prehistorical past. Nevertheless, *The Dawn of Tibet* offers much to ponder, and if Bellezza sometimes makes assertions where he should leave questions open, he is always asking interesting questions, and providing materials for possible answers.<sup>2</sup>

Another criticism that has been levelled against Bellezza is that he sometimes fits his source material to his theories, that the Zhang Zhung kingdom is an *idée fixe*, an overarching concept that holds together Bellezza's disparate material. Similarly, he has been criticised for imposing the concept of a monolithic Bon religion upon the early ritual material. If there was justification for these criticisms in Bellezza's previous work, in *The Dawn of Tibet* he is careful to distinguish earlier and later uses of the term *bon*, and offers a very good summary of how we should understand the shifting meanings of the term (pp. 7-8):

In Old Tibetan literature, written circa 700-1000 CE, *bon* denotes specific mythological and ritual traditions, and *bonpo* are the practitioners of those traditions. In this older historical context, *bon* was not the name of a monolithic religion, nor was it a blanket referent for every one of early Tibet's myriad cultural traditions. This sense of the word only came about after the archaic religious and cultural traditions were bundled up into one conceptual framework by Lamaism retrospectively.

There are still considerable obstacles to understanding the early civilizations of Upper Tibet. Early manuscripts sources for ritual practices, such as those from the Dunhuang cave, post-date the assimilation of these cultures into the Tibetan Buddhist imperium. The much more detailed and elaborate ritual and historical literature of the Bonpo school is even later, and is written to present the Zhang Zhung kingdom as a mythological golden age. However, there certainly are many correspondences to be found between the manuscripts, the later Bonpo literature, and the archaeological record, and Bellezza is the only scholar to have attempted to map them in a sustained way. *The Dawn of Tibet* is the best introduction to his work so far.

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#### About the author

**Sam van Schaik** is based at the British Library, as Research Project Manager for the International Dunhuang Project. His research includes Buddhism in Tibet and Central Asia, the history and study of manuscripts. He is currently a Principal Investigator in the research project, "Beyond Boundaries: Religion, Region, Language and the State" (European

Research Council, 2014-20). Recent publications include *Tibet: A History* (Yale U.P., 2012) and *Tibetan Zen* (Snow Lion, 2015).

## Notes

1. Bellezza has also published a detailed online resource, *Antiquities of Zhang Zhung* detailing his explorations and finds which are available online via the website of the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library <<http://www.thlib.org/bellezza>>. Since 2006, Bellezza has established a website <<http://www.tibetarchaeology.com>>, of which the main feature is a monthly newsletter, *Flight of the Khyung*, containing articles by the author.

2. For a criticisms of Bellezza's methods, based on his work before *The Dawn of Tibet*, see Henk Blezer, "sTon pa gShen rab: Six Marriages and Many More Funerals," *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 15 (2008), 421-79.

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