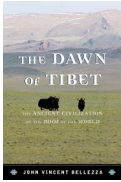

REVIEW: *THE DAWN OF TIBET*

Reviewed by Chelsea McGill (Independent Researcher)



Bellezza, John Vincent. 2014. *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. Xi +349. Four maps, black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1442234611 (hardback 39USD).

Since 1983, John Vincent Bellezza has made numerous treks into Upper Tibet, the cold, northern Plateau region in the Himalayas. In his excursions, he has discovered the remains of a thriving civilization in what is now considered one of the most difficult climates on earth. *The Dawn of Tibet* draws upon textual sources, ethnographic study with the people who live in Upper Tibet today, and his discoveries of archaeological sites to draw a multifaceted picture of what Zhang Zhung, as this civilization is referred to, might have looked like. His analysis is divided into ten chapters, each dealing with a separate kind of material.

After a short introduction to Upper Tibet, accompanied by some very vague, generalized maps - the only ones included in this book - his first chapter describes earlier scholarly work done in this area and the fieldwork the author has undertaken since the 1980s. According to Bellezza, it was normal for explorers to wander around Tibet without permission thirty years ago. This is how he made some of his early discoveries. More recently, he has undertaken several planned research missions with Tibetan colleagues to explore the more desolate regions of the Upper Plateau.

Chapter Two serves as an introduction to the geography of Upper Tibet, including the flora and fauna, while Chapter Three provides detailed ethnographic data about the people living in Upper Tibet today, both the *drokpa* 'herders' and the *shingpa* 'farmers'.

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While this ethnographic data could be helpful for anyone desiring details about life in Upper Tibet, Bellezza writes in a non-reflexive way that sometimes comes across as demeaning. For example, the section "Human Minds and Animal Spirits" begins with the following description: "Where there are drokpas, there is livestock. The two are inseparably linked in a covenant sealed in ancient times" (59). While poetic, the overall effect of this writing style is to render the people of Upper Tibet as exotic, mystical beings who are directly connected to the ancient past - something that is, to say the least, extremely problematic.

The fourth chapter introduces small bits of information about Zhang Zhung that can be gleaned from the scriptures of the present-day religious traditions of Eternal Bon and Tibetan Buddhism (which he considers the "Lamaist" traditions to differentiate them from the pre-Buddhist Tibetan traditions). While this attempt at reconstructing the pre-historic political sphere is admirable, this chapter is almost unreadable for anyone who is not already familiar with these texts. This is particularly true for the section in which he attempts to reconstruct the royal lineage of Zhang Zhung. The most helpful part of this chapter is the author's comparisons of cities, temples, castles, and so on that are mentioned in these texts with sites that he has located. He does not, however, provide maps or other images that would help the reader to locate them.

Chapter Five details where and what kind of archaeological remains have been identified. Zhang Zhung architectural styles have a few idiosyncratic elements adapted to the environment of the region. These include all-stone architecture with very thick walls; small doors, passageways, and rooms; and roofs made entirely of stone. Some of these stone buildings have survived intact, and this book provides pictures that adequately demonstrate this form of architecture. Some of the most impressive sites are castles and military fortifications, with huge walls situated along defensible mountain ridges. At these sites, the author has also identified smaller, more rudimentary stone houses located in the valley where farmers or herders probably lived under the eye of the military or rulers. The author also discusses the buildings he

considers to be temples or hermitages, which are smaller and located in remote areas. There also seem to be examples of these remote buildings that were used as royal residences, however, so I am unsure on what basis he has classified them as one or the other.

The following chapter discusses the variety of tomb and funerary architecture found in Upper Tibet. One rather common variety is standing stones, or pillars, surrounded by graves and located in barren areas. Other tombs are built in the same way as the residential and ruling buildings described in the previous chapter, including thick walls and all-stone architecture. One very interesting observation is the comparison of these permanent burial sites with modern-day Tibetan Buddhist funerary rites, usually called sky burial, which leave no real archaeological remains (154). It is perhaps this comparison that best highlights the difference between Buddhist and pre-Buddhist society in the area. The author also mentions that the wide variety of burial forms indicates social stratification (158), but I would note that the chronological sequence of these finds is unclear. It is possible that funerary architecture changed significantly over time, so the wide variety of burials could indicate both social stratification and social change. At the end of the chapter, the author notes that many of these sites have been looted in recent times and that the Chinese government has done little, if anything, to protect them (165-166).

The seventh chapter deals with other remains of the ancient cultures of Upper Tibet, specifically the rock art (both petroglyphs and pictographs) and metal artifacts. In his travels, the author has documented a wide variety of rock art, and he notes a few general categories: animals, anthropomorphic, swastikas and temples, etc. Surprisingly, this chapter is accompanied by very few pictures. The ones which are included are all in low-resolution black-and-white, making it difficult to understand exactly what the author is trying to demonstrate. His assumptions about the nature of these artistic forms should also be taken with a grain of salt, since apart from the obvious designs it is very difficult to know whether these were in fact intended for religious or other purposes. One fascinating section noted that the

swastikas used by Eternal Bon and Tibetan Buddhist devotees turn in opposite directions, and that there are several examples of one group destroying the symbols of the other religion and covering them with their own (174-175). As for the metal artifacts, the author simply gives a catalog of the various finds that range from iron models of temples to weapons to beautifully fine fibulas, probably used as broaches or medallions.

In the eighth chapter, Bellezza returns to the textual sources to attempt a reconstruction of the pre-Lamaist religious practices of Upper Tibet. From the written texts, it is evident that the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet caused major cultural and religious changes; the Eternal Bon religion is, in fact, a combination of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist beliefs (205-206). Both Eternal Bon and Tibetan Buddhism lumped the diverse earlier religious practices of the region into a single category, "bon" (203). Bellezza traces the development of several Eternal Bon personalities, including the reputed founder of the religion, Tompa Shenrab, and the powerful god, Gekho, from the earliest available texts written in obscure Old Tibetan to the more recent Eternal Bon and Tibetan Buddhist textual sources. In what is the most convincing argument of the entire book, the author argues that the most definitive change brought about by the advent of Lamaism was the abandonment of ritual animal sacrifice, which seems to have been an important aspect of pre-Buddhist religious practices.

The penultimate chapter also taps into the textual sources to discover the remaining information about Zhang Zhung culture. As the author points out, "a broad survey of recurring themes and fundamental motifs" reveals several patterns that are clearly different from the Lamaist traditions of later years (248). Of these, the most important is the "martial predilections" of the early priests, who are depicted as "vigorously involved in military affairs of state" (249). Many of the descriptions of these archaic era priests feature detailed descriptions of battles or arrays of weapons, many of which seem to draw upon the iconography of archaic-era gods and goddesses, as described in the previous chapter (250). Bellezza goes further to assert that political and religious authorities seem to have supported each

other, as also indicated by the similarities between palace and temple architecture that he has seen in the archaeological record (253-254). He also describes a material culture that is significantly different from Lamaist forms, which involves many lavish gifts given by the king, including clothing made from the skins of tigers, leopards, and clouded leopards (263-264). Another indication of the warlike culture of ancient Zhang Zhung is the extensive description and classification of weapons and armor (264-269).

The last chapter concerns present-day rituals carried out by both the laypeople and shamans of Upper Tibet. Bellezza contends that these rituals indicate "a cultural conservatism that is probably more pronounced than anywhere else in the Tibetan cultural world," and he proceeds to make connections between several present-day rituals and their ancient forbears (as described in the textual sources) (272). Of these, the most convincing is the continuation of shamans' medium rituals, although it is unclear whether the present-day ritual forms directly correspond to those practiced in Zhang Zhung.

This book provides a survey of all available evidence, which provides tantalizing hints of possible connections and ideas for future research. However, much of this data is presented in a way that makes it difficult to understand exactly what the author is suggesting. More detailed maps, sketches of archaeological sites, and better quality, color photos should have been included - it is unclear why they were not. Color photos are especially needed for the otherwise fascinating discussion of rock art. The long discussion of obscure texts is also not presented in a way that can be easily used, at least for someone lacking a background in Eternal Bon literature.

Of deeper concern is the ease with which the author moves between ancient textual sources and modern-day ethnographic data. While it does seem that there are significant connections between archaic era traditions and the lives of people in present-day Upper Tibet, it seems to be at least naïve and at most irresponsible to draw such direct lines between practices from different time periods. This study would have had adequate data based on the archaeological and textual evidence. I do not understand why the ethnographic data was

brought in at all. Instead of incorporating this present-day data, it would have been better to have written two separate monographs: one establishing the archaeological and textual evidence regarding Zhang Zhung and another discussing the ethnographic data and its possible connections to earlier traditions. As it is, this book tries to do too much at once, resulting in an often confusing collection of details which may or may not be related.

The ideal audience for this book is scholars who have a background in Ancient Tibetan religious texts and/or the present-day culture of the region, and who are searching for research ideas. *The Dawn of Tibet* brims with ideas for future research, while presenting few valid conclusions of its own.