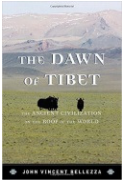


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 REVIEW: *THE DAWN OF TIBET*

Reviewed by Ivette M. Vargas-O'Bryan (Austin College)



John Vincent Bellezza. 2014. *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. ix + 347pp, 4 maps, 3 tables, 45 illustrations. ISBN 978-1-4422-3461-1 (hardback 39USD).

If you want to learn more about the pre-Buddhist heritage of Tibet and the Western Himalayas, one name stands out: John Vincent Bellezza. Unlike any other, we encounter a uniqueness in Bellezza's works, a breadth of detail, insight, and personal struggle that has been unsurpassed in archaeology and Tibetan Studies these days. Bellezza's numerous publications that include such groundbreaking works as *Divine Dyads* (1997), *Calling Down the Gods* (2005), the significant contributions of *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet* (2008), *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet*, and the critical two volume set, *Antiquities of Zhang Zhung* (2010), have provided robust studies on Tibet's pre-Buddhist heritage in an unconventional style that at once incorporates his skills as an archaeologist with one of cultural historian, anthropologist, travel journalist, explorer, and storyteller.

When I read this new work, my assumptions about Tibet as a land whose colorful history and civilization was most impacted by Buddhism shortly after the seventh century were shaken again. My attention was drawn to periods long before the Buddhist presence revealed through forgotten lands, writings, and ritual customs that point to a Tibetan civilization far more ancient, complex, and historically important on a global scale than I could have imagined. Presenting such complexity does come with a price because Bellezza's integrative, ambitious approach has its complications. Yet his

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<sup>1</sup> Vargas-O'Bryan, Ivette M. 2017. Review: The Dawn of Tibet. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:98-104.

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unwillingness to restrict himself to the strictures and disciplinary boundaries of academia order to find answers on the ground, and to assert challenging connections may reveal some treasures of the past.

From the very beginning in *The Dawn of Tibet*, 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. However, his search and discoveries go further back to a time that pre-dates and yet, impacts this mysterious civilization. This synthesis in ten chapters of his previous studies also provides a progression of his theories and an increasingly systematic documentation of findings following and surpassing other archaeologists and anthropologists before him. It also highlights the impact of Western and Chinese scholars and expeditions. The book begins with a brief synopsis of his personal history of exploration in Tibet and his documentation of around 700 sites. His documentation of monuments, rock art, and ruins are linked with old literary tales and contemporary ritual customs that form the basis for the history and culture of pre-Zhang Zhung and the Zhang Zhung civilization.

The second and third chapters introduce the geography and people of Upper Tibet with summaries of his observations. The *drokpas* loom large in his study; this hearty group of tent-dwelling people live in an often harsh and unpredictable region, herding yaks, sheep, and goats. The *shingpas* are distinguished from the *drokpas*, providing an example of farming subsistence living, a contrast to the itinerant lifestyle traditions of the *drokpas*. Bellezza begins making correspondences already by noting that ritual practices performed by *lhapa* have some similarities to ancient practices found in Upper Tibet.

It is not until Chapter Four that we get an introduction to the Zhang Zhung kingdom based, for the most part, on Eternal Bon literature and mythological narratives of culture heroes such as *Zhang Zhung Nyen Gyu* and other texts, as well as legends collected in his research. Also so-called spirits (gods, demons such as *dre*, *klu*, and *sri*) are linked in fascinating ways with the archaeological sites and people of Upper Tibet. Here, he also recounts from sources like the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* the periods of Zhang Zhung reign that corresponded

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to Buddhist rule in central and other areas of Tibet. Especially intriguing are Bellezza's attempts to trace Olmolungring, which is known to be linked to the mythical Shambhala and Kalachakra (according to Martin 1995) and to actual locations within and outside Tibet. The significance of this is also linked with Tibet's global influence in ancient times predating the influx of Buddhism. In this chapter Bellezza seems to be particularly concerned with making sure the reader understands the application of modern Eternal Bon theories to the history of its tradition, especially because of the sparse older evidence available. His brief compilation of myths, rituals, and sites to the vast array of Tibetan tribes over the ages provides theoretical challenges.

The next three chapters provide a dense summary of his findings on castles, burial grounds, rock paintings, and artifacts connecting past and current research. First, Bellezza documents the ruins of archaic castles and temples for clues on the inhabitants of the area with the awareness that their pastoral lifestyle likely inclined them to inhabit "caves, portable shelters, and rudimentary stone houses" (123). Then, he presents evidence of stone age tools and a variety of social spheres ("acropolises, palaces, temples, hermitages, and villages") (115). He also attempts to understand funerary sites and mortuary monuments and studies the prolific art forms of rock paintings and carvings, including metallic objects. These studies collectively provide evidence for his later assertions of the development of pre-Buddhist Tibetan civilization. These chapters specifically highlight how under-researched this region is despite the plethora of extant monuments and artifacts, as well as historical information on former monuments.

Scholars interested in the use of animals in Tibetan culture and religion and the links between myths, legends, and medical texts will find chapters Seven and Eight particularly helpful. Research on the appearance of animals that figure in Buddhist literature and medical texts would be greatly facilitated by a comparative study of the archaeological and comparative textual evidence that Bellezza

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provides in his studies. Such medical and even biographical sources could be fruitfully informed by these other documents.

In chapters Eight and Nine, Bellezza attempts to make some concrete connections between the past and present or what he calls, prehistory and history. He puts himself out on a limb when he draws together the literature of the early Bonpo and Dunhuang manuscripts on funerals and other rituals and connects them to ancient sites, artifacts, and the still-extant spirit possession rituals. He also takes several steps toward finding correlations of details between so-called Zhang Zhung or Upper Tibetan regional structures (platforms, for example) and Buddhist ("Lamaist") structures, e.g., *chortens*. It is clear that these comparisons are painstakingly difficult undertakings that point to the need for further research and accumulation of evidence.

This work presents some exciting possibilities that in certain cases encourages research beyond what Bellezza is able to provide. Perhaps this work evokes a message that scholars in Tibetan and Buddhist Studies should go beyond their narrow disciplines and perspectives and take the time to encounter and study the textual documents and archaeological evidence that Bellezza draws from in order to get a more robust sense of Tibetan history and culture. For example, my studies on *klu* disease and rituals in the *Rgyud bzhi* and *klu* figures in the *Klu 'Bum* could potentially benefit from drawing on Eternal Bon material, pre-Buddhist mythological documents, findings at archaeological sites, and contemporary rituals of Upper Tibetan inhabitants. Medical texts and Buddhist narratives are limited in their coverage of interpretations of animal figures and clan rituals. Expanding our horizons to the archaeological findings that Bellezza has documented provides another level of evidence that could potentially add to textual and historical documents.

Bellezza's previous work has not been immune to criticism (Kvaerne 2015). His disparate material is often held together to justify his speculations and theories, especially on reconstructing the Zhang Zhung civilization. He does make some theoretical assertions based on speculations or "leaps of faith" about correlations between past and

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present, textual and archaeological evidence, and even utilizing materials that post-date Zhang Zhung by several centuries. An example of this is when he comments on the Dunhuang material, "Unmistakably, this Pt 1136 origin tale alludes to a prehistoric phase in the culture of Upper Tibet" (235).

How reliable are these later materials in order to understand a hidden past? In addition, very little direct information is provided on how his work compares to those of others, especially the recent excavations by Chinese teams. These other findings may fill in some critical gaps and uncertainties in Bellezza's work.

In this work, Bellezza has been careful to distinguish earlier and later uses of Bon and shifting meanings of the tradition (7-8) and how Eternal Bon can be useful to understanding former traditions. However, this work also points to the considerable obstacles that exist in piecing together diverse evidence of various periods in order to understand a past that right now has sparse direct textual and historical correspondences. Perhaps one special insight Bellezza has given readers and scholars is that we need to push back our views of Tibetan civilization to a time when it was not dominated by Buddhist discourse. Conducting detailed comparative studies of both Buddhist and pre-Buddhist materials may reveal possible correspondences.

Overall, *The Dawn of Tibet* presents the cumulative efforts and progression of a seasoned scholar going beyond what archaeology is able to provide, armed with the support of literature, history, religion, and ritual customs. This is a work for a general audience and is a more palatable read than his past works. *The Dawn of Tibet* takes the reader on a journey that is not one of linearity, but one that spreads out in several directions until meeting at one point. It also has much to offer the scholar with its insights on Tibetan civilization and thus stretches beyond the confines of the familiar, creating a complex journey of discovery.

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