



9-2020

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#### Recommended Citation

Wilkinson, Constance (2020) "John Vincent Bellezza. The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 83 : No. 83 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol83/iss83/22>

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**John Vincent Bellezza. *The Dawn of Tibet:  
The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World.*  
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014**

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

*The Dawn of Tibet: the Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World* by John Vincent Bellezza is a unique work by an intrepid explorer-scholar who, purely from his own inspiration, spent decades doggedly tracking down traces of the prehistoric Zhang Zhung civilization, a Metal Age culture (famed for making iron weapons of war) and a polity that dominated the remote northwestern plateau of Upper Tibet until the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

This rich and unusual book summarizes the results of Bellezza's many expeditions into this high-altitude, inhospitable, and often life-threateningly dangerous Changthang<sup>1</sup> region; it presents his archaeological discoveries, informed by written records, histories, myths, rituals. He has also collected oral histories, myths, legends, and narratives from local narrators, nomad herders of sheep and yak who claim descent from the ancient clans of Zhang Zhung, and whose daily lives are still impacted by ancient indigenous rituals and beliefs.

The arising of Zhang Zhung is generally set--but not in stone--around 1,000 BCE; whether its manifestation was more a Late Bronze age or Early Iron age occurrence has not yet been demonstrated with precision.

What has been demonstrated with precision by Bellezza is inarguable evidence of not merely the existence of Zhang Zhung<sup>2</sup> as a civilization, but its power, stability, and regional influence, reflected in Bellezza's identification of a great network of ancient ruins, which, collectively, span "a thousand miles from west to east." (2)

Bellezza states that "this [Zhang Zhung] civilization remained a major force in uppermost Tibet for roughly fifteen centuries<sup>3</sup>, [lasting] twice the length of time of the Roman republic and empire combined." (76)

In the mid-700's CE, Zhang Zhung was invaded by its neighbor to the east, Imperial Tibet, and, under its imperialist hegemony, it virtually disappeared, aided in its destruction by an abruptly worsening climate and the near-total annihilation/assimilation of its religious culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, "Northern Plain."

<sup>2</sup> "'Zhang Zhung' is used in this work as a generic appellation for pre-seventh century CE upland civilization, including its cultural, linguistic, and political aspects." (76)

<sup>3</sup> 1200 BCE to 700 CE

John Vincent Bellezza began to explore the northern plains, or, Changthang, in 1986. He "managed to walk across a swath of open basins without a stove or tent," a journey of 175 miles, out in the snow and sleet. Later that year, he went to Mt. Kailash, again traveling without a stove or tent, travelling as Tibetan pilgrims do, learning the language, even reaching the source of the Indus. (17)

In the nineties, Bellezza explored Lake Namtsho and Lake Dangra, and was guided to certain places "where signs of a past age of greatness could still be seen." (19) On the basis of his work, he published the monograph, "Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilization in Tibet."

During this time, Bellezza met a number of helpful luminaries: H.H. the Dalai Lama, H.H. Menri Khenpo, head of the Eternal Bon religion, the eminent Bon scholar Lopon Tenzin Namdak, abbot Chado Rinpoche, and Choygyal Namkhai Norbu, providing encouragement and information.

In 1997, he traveled to Darok Tsho, in the northwestern section of the plateau. Around this freshwater lake, he found ruins of temples and hermitages. Most interesting on this expedition were two islands in the lake; he could see ancient ruins on the islands, Tsho Do and Do Drilbu, but he had no way to get to them.

In 1998, the indomitable Bellezza decided to circumambulate Lake Teri Namtsho, a huge undertaking. He discovered two headlands that had once been islands known as Po Do. In order to reach them, Bellezza "had to negotiate several kilometers of alkaline flats, pockmarked with pools of quicksand." (21) There he found "traces of ancient edifices, parts of elite cloistered communities, nerve centers of culture that in their time drew in resources from around the region." (21)

By the end of 1998, he had located and documented over 100 sites belonging to Zhang Zhung, hoping to document every visible ancient remain in Upper Tibet to build a "comprehensive inventory of pre-Buddhist archaeological sites." (23)

In 1999, his Changthang Circuit Expedition braved snowstorms, sandstorms, flooded roads, and a supply truck that "plunged off the edge of a ravine," and found "a striking spectrum of ancient castles, temples, villages, menhirs, tombs, cave shelters, and rock art." (22)

Bellezza's Upper Tibet Circumnavigation Expedition presented other obstacles, as "the trails to many mountaintop citadels had long since collapsed, forcing climbs up and down cliff faces and narrow ledges with only the most minimal of holds for the hands and feet. It was a precarious undertaking using a tape measure on crumbling stone walls along the edges of precipices." (22)

In 2001, his Upper Tibet Antiquities Expedition "clocked five thousand miles in vehicles and hundreds more on foot and horseback" to find 90 sites. In 2002, the High Tibet Circle Expedition covered eight thousand miles by vehicle (and more on foot and on horseback) and found another hundred sites.

It was only in 2002, after 18 years, that his work became officially sanctioned. A bilateral agreement was signed through the University of Virginia and the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences. Bellezza was able to organize expeditions through the auspices of the TASS. This produced the High Tibet Circle Expedition which, in 2002, discovered Chunak<sup>4</sup>, a large burial ground with a network of tombs, pillars, and mounds. In 2003, the TASS/High Tibet Antiquities Expedition revealed architectural remains that served to fix the Western geographic limit of Zhang Zhung.<sup>5</sup>

Bellezza put together the Tibet Ice Lakes Expedition in 2006 to explore ruins of stone buildings on islands locals told him could be reached - in winter, over ice. These were the same islands he had seen from afar when he went to Lake Namtsho nine years before.

Approaching the frozen lake, in a warming climate, he reports, "The ice was uncomfortably thin when we arrived at the lakeshore opposite [the island of] Semo Do. The way across to the island was unnerving. The lake would screech and shudder every time we tried to walk on it. There lay an abyssal black expanse below the frozen surface, and only six to eight inches of ice separated us from it. If it were not for [my Tibetan associates], I never would have ventured onto Lake Nam Tsho." (26)

In order to discover clues to new ruins, Bellezza needed to win the trust of local people, the nomad livestock herders, and he did. They repaid his trust with hospitality and information as to the lay of their land, ruins they had seen, ruins they had heard of, ruins Bellezza had heard of, but only in texts.

In a region with an *average* elevation of 15,000 feet, the dauntless Bellezza survived travelling quicksand and windstorms to document more than seven hundred separate ancient sites: castles, temples, rock paintings, metal artefacts, monuments, ceremonial places, yielding thousands of individual structures and pictorial compositions that have managed to survive for thousands of years.

Exemplar ruins still remain, not only because of their locations are so remote as to be nearly inaccessible, but also because the majority were indeed "set in stone."

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<sup>4</sup> Lit., "black water."

Many Zhang Zhung structures rely entirely on stone, as Bellezza describes them, designed "with sinuous ground plans and meandering walls, these edifices present a very different appearance from structures created with wooden roofs. They contain warrens of tiny rooms connected by short passageways, internal spaces isolated from the glare of the sun and the brunt of the wind." (118)

Bellezza states that "the Metal Age in Upper Tibet was a time of thriving agricultural centers guarded by a chain of mountaintop strongholds and fortified temples. Established at over 17,000 feet above sea level, these robustly built all-stone structures appear to have housed the chieftains and priests who ruled over Zhang Zhung... [n]owhere else in the world did humanity construct permanent dwellings in such lofty locations." (5)

In ruins made visible by the arid, harsh, windy climate, he finds evidence of complex social hierarchies, inter-regional trade, irrigated agriculture, all ringed by a coordinated chain of defensive citadels and fortresses.

Bellezza says that "the high-altitude harshness of Upper Tibet is mediated by stunning beauty. The inherent sublimity of the landscape offsets its destructive power...glowing with an almost otherworldly resplendence, rock formations and bodies of water assume the richest hues imaginable. Upper Tibet is so spacious as to appear limitless...the countryside is as vivid with eyes open as it is in dreams." (30)

He describes with fondness the people who in the present day manage to survive in this impossible environment, nomad livestock herders (*drokpas*, in Tibetan) whose lives are to this day still connected to rites and myths and texts that have come down to them from ancient Zhang Zhung.

In a chapter called "Touching the Sky: The Citadels and Temples of Zhang Zhung," the reports locating and then surveying 140 archaic era castles, pointing out that "[t]he ancient castles of Upper Tibet occupied strategic economic and military positions, enjoying unencumbered views of the outlying terrain. Their unassailable geographic aspect would have made attack by an enemy difficult and costly . . . [only] the most powerful members of society would have had mastery over the mountaintop castles." (121) Funerary sites reveal other information about Zhang Zhung: differences in site size and intricacy suggest socially stratified communities.

What have I omitted? Detailed sections on rock art, religion, magic, mystery, history. Truly peculiar, precious objects: agate-like artefacts called Dzi, amulets called "Thogchak" apparently made of meteoric iron, both said to be "self-arisen;" that is, objects found, not made by artisans.

Detailed sections on literature, colorful, fantastical "tales of powerful magicians controlling the elements and movements of planets, *perfecti* knowing everything there is to know in the universe, saints stopping powerful armies in their tracks with mantras." (77)

Bellezza's work is too rich for this review to do it justice. Those interested in, say, the comparative study of civilizations, may benefit from learning of Zhang Zhung, a singular civilization long lost, beginning to be re-found.