

FOREWORD

John Vincent Bellezza's magisterial *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet* is an ambitious and ground-breaking inquiry that no doubt will remain required reading as a standard work for years to come. It is a serious attempt to unravel many hitherto obscure aspects of civilization in prehistoric Tibet, a first systematic topography of the numerous monuments belonging to the remote past in Upper Tibet.

Bellezza's work centers on a number of questions of great intricacy, such as the actual extent, duration and nature of the old highland civilization commonly associated with Zhang-zhung and Sum-pa. He audaciously addresses these issues armed with his latest findings and a new interpretative framework won from reading many texts in a new context. The problems which have vexed scholars for so long are legion and are not only linguistic but also ethnic and material in nature. We are only at the beginning of discovering what is concealed behind these areas of inquiry. The gaps between the surviving histories, physical vestiges and ritual legacies that may be remnants of Zhang-zhung civilization and the engrossing but arguably disfigured picture primarily found in post-imperial Bon sources idealizing Zhang-zhung (often as a lost paradise and golden civilization) are still considerable and occasionally insurmountable. Bellezza is constantly aware of the prevailing discrepancies between the empirical and often meagre data and the largely post-imperial construct found in later overtly mythographical written materials. The attentive reader will find many challenging and contestable assertions which will doubtlessly require further inquiries. Yet, Bellezza succeeds admirably in filtering the sources and data to offer us fresh insights and a better understanding, weaving them into a grand organic synthesis. New promising avenues of research are also indicated by the methodology and approach he chooses. Archaeological research in Tibet is still in its infancy, and full-fledged excavations of the numerous burial grounds and necropoli dotting the rugged Tibetan landscape will no doubt be informed by this work.

Bellezza has already made himself a name by paving the way for the present magnum opus in a number of pioneering studies dedicated to different aspects of the physical and cultural assets of early Upper Tibet. The present work serves as the impressive culmination of these laudable scientific endeavors and the critical discussions here benefit enormously from his earlier inquiries and documentations. Solitary in the truest sense of the word, over the years John has ventured into uncharted territory, submerging himself in a world ignored by fellow researchers: during endless months of travels along untrodden paths and long-forgotten trails, crossing vast hinterlands in search for material and archaeological vestiges, with unbridled curiosity and fine acumen, he has recorded countless archaeological objects and cultural artefacts, studied hitherto unknown and remote sites and burial grounds, and analyzed a vast bulk of local texts and sources, as well as conducted numerous in situ interviews. The exciting outcome of his multi-disciplinary queries is inscribed in every page of this work penned with much gusto: the grand cultural monuments of the remotest strata of Tibetan civilization speak to us through these pages and reveal many of their secrets. A remarkable blend of disciplines, a true feat and a quantum leap in our present knowledge.

I encourage any intrepid scholar and any serious reader – fearless of philological pitfalls and ready to embrace the rich cornucopia of minute details – to join me on this exciting journey into Tibet’s remotest past, and with John challenge old assumptions and redefine new theories.

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