

**SPECIAL REPORT: A Dark New View of the American Southwest**

# Discovering Archaeology

May / June 1999

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Witches  
& Wars**

**Building Pyramids**

Rolling the Stones

**Early Voices**

Talking 500,000 Years Ago?

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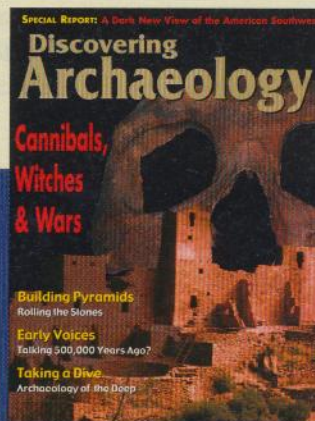
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A Model Archaeologist

## About the Cover

A prehistoric skull from the Southwest, showing evidence of brutal violence, sits behind the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings, which may have been built to escape warfare in the region.



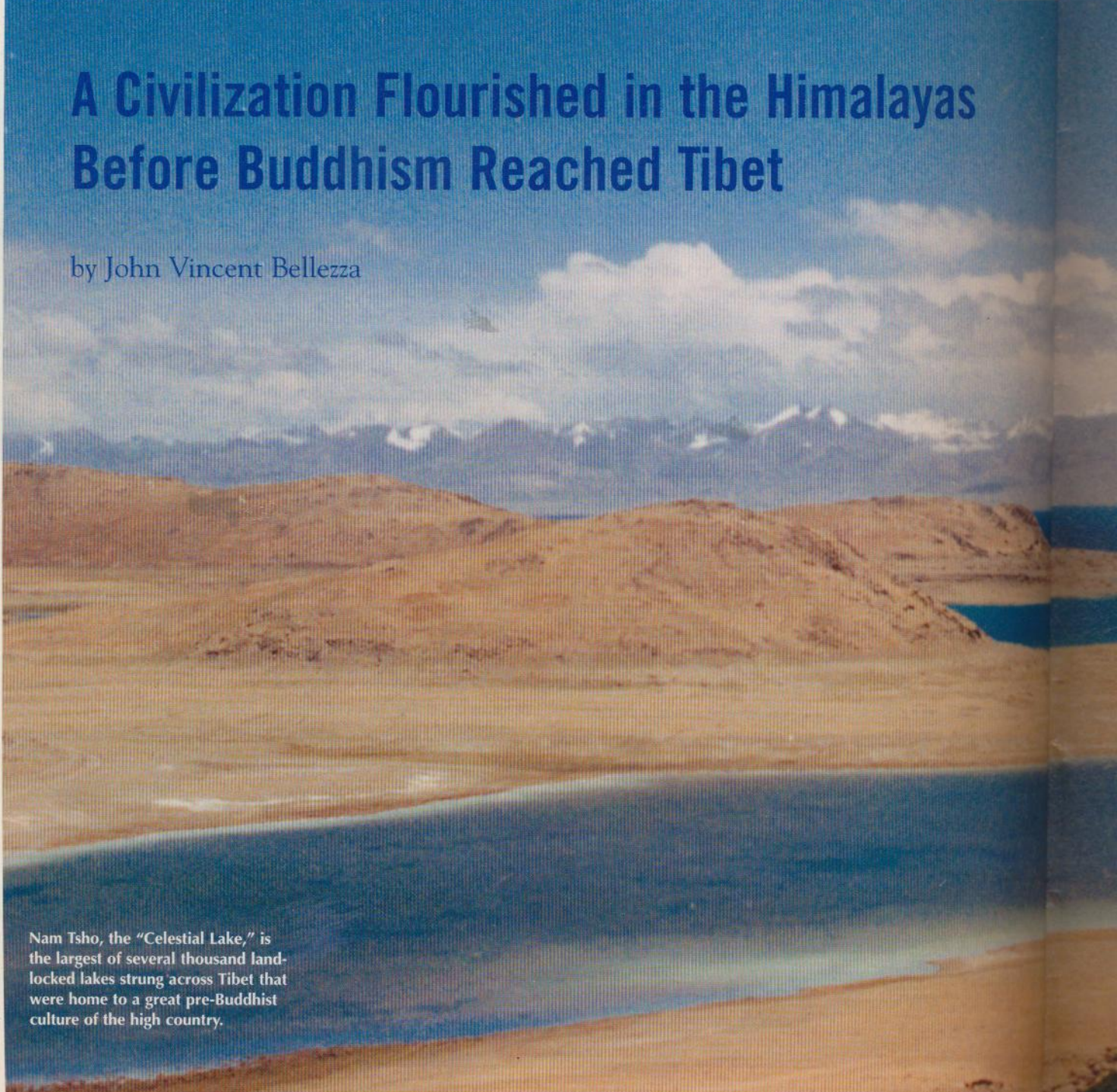
MESA VERDE PHOTO: WERNER FORMAN/ART  
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SKULL: CHRISTY G. TURNER II



# HIGH-COUNTRY

## A Civilization Flourished in the Himalayas Before Buddhism Reached Tibet

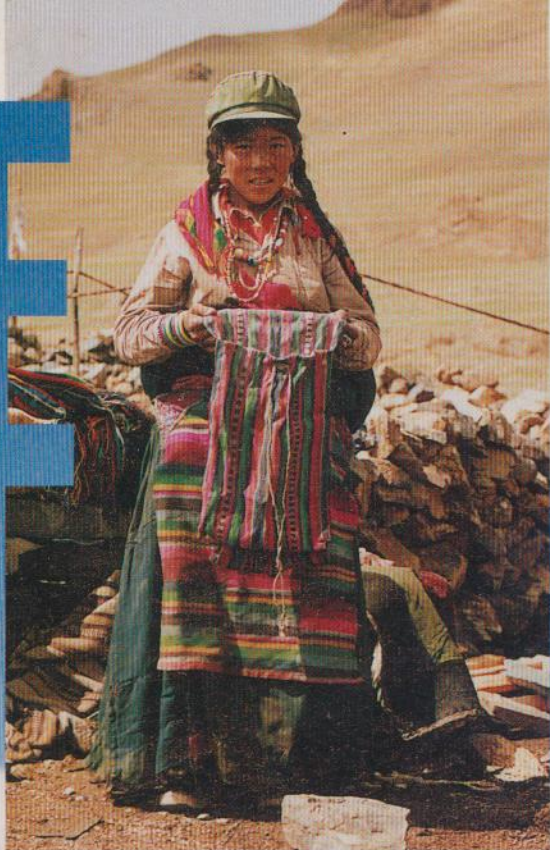
by John Vincent Bellezza



Nam Tsho, the "Celestial Lake," is the largest of several thousand land-locked lakes strung across Tibet that were home to a great pre-Buddhist culture of the high country.



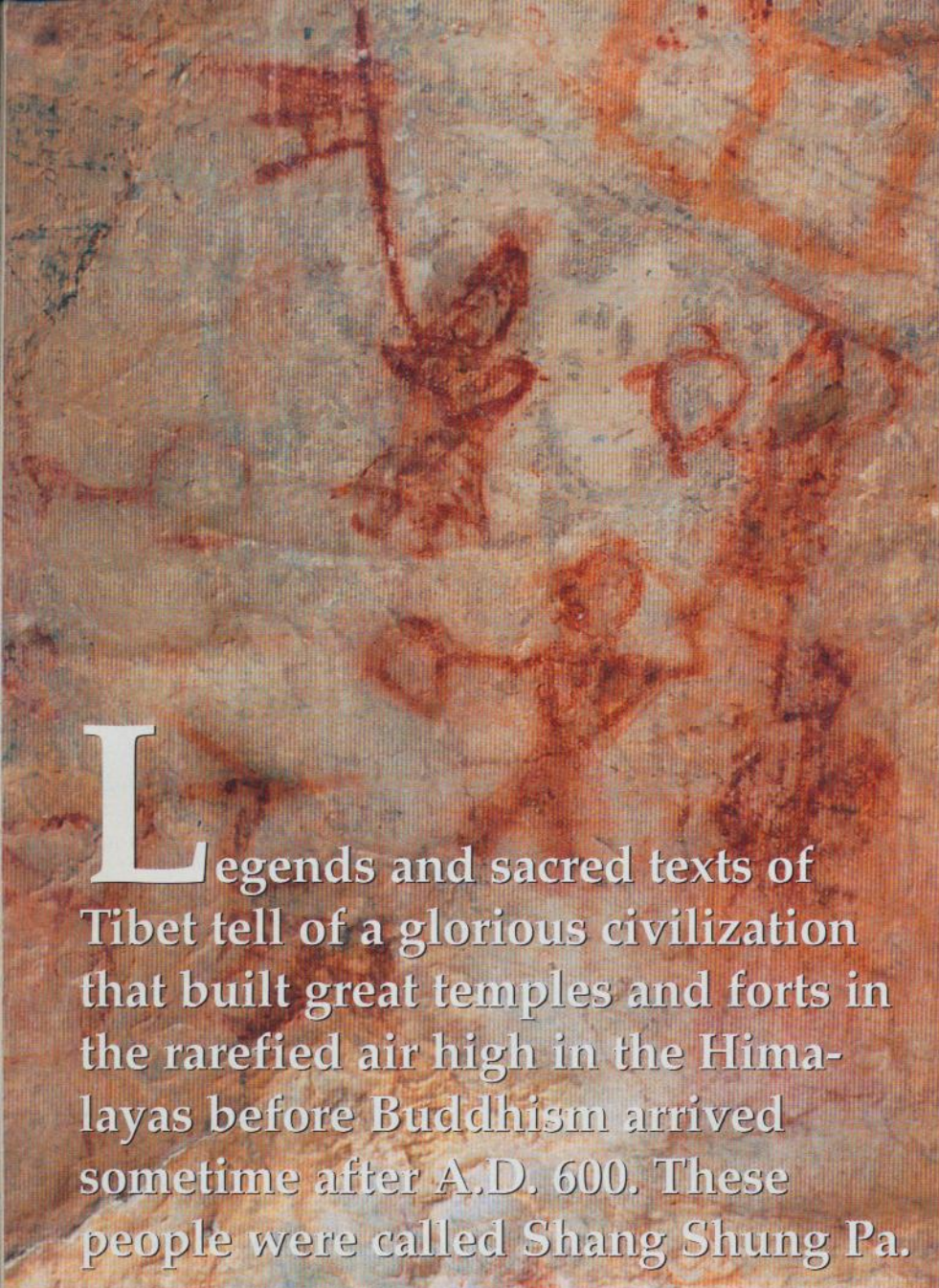
# CULTURE



A young weaver of the Drokpa people, descendants of Tibet's first settlers, displays her wares in the Changthang region of Tibet. This highest, coldest, and driest part of the Tibetan Plateau was home to the pre-Buddhist Shang Shung civilization.







# L

egends and sacred texts of Tibet tell of a glorious civilization that built great temples and forts in the rarefied air high in the Himalayas before Buddhism arrived sometime after A.D. 600. These people were called Shang Shung Pa.

The Shang Shung culture flourished until about 1,300 years ago, when it collapsed in the face of deteriorating climate, and cultural and religious changes. At 4,600 to 5,200 meters (15,000 to 17,000 feet) above sea level, Shang Shung is at the highest elevation of any civilization ever found. Descendants of Shang Shung Pa are the Drokpa, who herd yak and sheep across the vastness of the Changthang region of Tibet.

Scriptures of Bon, the indigenous religion of Tibet, describe a powerful kingdom with its own language and system

of writing that dominated northern and western Tibet for centuries. But scant evidence attested to Shang Shung's purported greatness, and the academic community remained skeptical.

For over a decade now, I have been exploring this stunningly beautiful country, discovering, in what is now mostly wilderness, the remnants of Shang Shung villages, temples, tombs, and forts. The power and extent of this Iron Age civilization is much clearer now, but an enormous amount of work remains. My explorations lift just a corner of the shroud, revealing an

Cave paintings are heavily sprinkled around Nam Tsho, the largest of Tibet's chain of lakes left by ancient glaciers. The author found scores of these spectacular images while circling the lake on foot.

unexpected depth in the mystery of Shang Shung.

Information emerges slowly from Tibet. One of the last blank spaces on the world map, Tibet did not yield its geographic secrets to outsiders until the twentieth century. Little is known of the time before Buddhism arrived.

Until extensive excavations are conducted, the chronology of Shang Shung sites remains in question. But the culture's existence and end are clear from written texts. Among the earliest writings about the Shang Shung is the *Old Tibet Chronicle* from the ninth century, near the culture's downfall. Many Bon scriptures extol the courage and virtue of Shang Shung-era saints, who practiced an early form of the Bon religion.

Shang Shung's beginnings are far less certain: No dates exist. Clearly, however, enough time has passed to reduce monumental structures to rubble, with no sign of violence. Ancient-climate data suggest some uninhabited Shang Shung sites once enjoyed far more favorable weather.

## Cities on Colorful Lakes

One of the most significant Shang Shung settlement regions was a chain of thousands of landlocked lakes left by glaciers across 970 kilometers (600 miles) of the Changthang. They boast the most radiant colors imaginable, colors painted by thousands of years of rainwater runoff spiked with minerals leached from the land. This process converted the once-freshwater lakes into saline ponds too salty for drinking. Chinese data suggest water from most lakes could not have been potable for at least the last 1,500 years.

That can, however, be misleading. Ample freshwater existed nearby in the



form of rivers and springs, and the islands, cliffs, and headlands in the chain of lakes offered considerable defensive value.

## Lakes of the Gods

To fully explain the Shang Shung sites on the lakes, one must consider the Bon religion. Before the advent of Buddhism, more than 1,200 years ago, Bon deities were primarily associated with topographical features and celestial phenomena.

Residing in sacred lakes and mountains, these ambivalent supernatural forces had both protective and ancestral functions. One type of ancient god, the *yul lha*, presided over a number of different locales and guarded the inhabitants. My research shows that the Shang Shung Pa frequently chose to

build their communities near the dwelling places of the *yul lha*.

The lakes were seen as powerful goddesses who ruled lesser *yul lha*. Bon texts imply the lakes were hubs of a spiritual and ecological network reaching across the Changthang. The soul and heart of the goddesses were seen as the islands and headlands in the lakes, the very places where many important Shang Shung sites are located.

The selection of some of the region's most inaccessible and sacred sites for settlement indicates they were occupied by a religious and cultural elite.

My exploration spanned more than a decade of driving almost 26,000 kilometers (16,000 miles) and walking another 6,500 kilometers (4,000 miles) in some of the most remote corners of Tibet. Shang Shung sites mostly are found on islands, rocky headlands, and cliffs in and around the lakes.

The remains of the Shang Shung civilization are concentrated along a string of landlocked lakes that stretch across the Changthang region of Tibet, now a part of China. ►

Teri Nam Tsho, the "Sky Lake of Variegated Mountains," takes its name from four sacred mountains that surround it. In Buddhist mythology, the mountains pin down a demon that lives in the lake; pre-Buddhist tales consider the mountains servants of a benign goddess of Teri Nam Tsho. Many ancient ruins, such as this religious monument on a peninsula that once was an island 4.8 kilometers (three miles) offshore, are scattered around the lake. ▼

This is a sampling of the previously unknown ruins I recorded:

About 160 kilometers (100 miles) northwest of the Tibetan city of Lhasa, lies Nam Tsho ("Celestial Lake"), the largest lake in the Changthang. This 80-kilometer (50-mile) body of brackish water is said to be the soul lake of the Tibetan nation and the home of Yum ("Mother"), a form of the most powerful Bon goddess. A series of Shang Shung monuments were built along the rugged north end of the lake, an area of towering limestone and granite cliffs. I







Fields of stone at a site called Sumbug Doring are covered by about 1,000 upright rocks, or stelae, of uncertain purpose. The stelae are 0.3 to 1.5 meters (one to five feet) tall and are located about 32 kilo-

meters (20 miles) from the Dangra Yumtsho lake, which also boasts the ruins of an unusually large hilltop fort, called Chugtsho Troppo, that once held at least 30 buildings.

found no record of archaeological explorations at the north shore of the lake until my six expeditions to the area in the 1980s and '90s.

The area was, however, visited in 1872 by two Pundits, Indian spies who worked for the British imperial government. They returned to India with fantastic stories of pyramids and other ancient wonders. One noted a passageway into one of the pyramids in which an ancient monk meditated.

I saw no pyramids, but I did find a number of ancient monuments. A 9.5-kilometer (six-mile) peninsula called Do Ring is in a spectacular setting, surrounded on three sides by the cobalt-blue waters of Nam Tsho. According to Bon histories, the Shang Shung saint Tong Gyung Thuchen meditated here with his consort, an emanation of the lake. A small group of ruins at the tip of the headland appears to be his ancient hermitage. At the center of the ruins, a yungdrung (a counterclockwise swastika used by the Bon) and a Bon mantra were inscribed on a boul-

der, proving its association with the ancient religion of Tibet.

About halfway down the north shore stand two pyramidal formations of red limestone called "Horse's Ears." In one, a natural passageway leads to the summit, where, according to elders of the region, a small Shang Shung temple sits in ruins. This probably explains the Pundits' spectacular report.

In 1993, the Tibet Commission of Archaeology examined some extraordinary cave paintings on the Tashi Do peninsula, in the southeast corner of the Nam Tsho. Building on this work, I doc-

umented many other paintings in several remote caves around the lake.

In 1994-95, I walked around Dangra Yumtsho, finding a wealth of archaeological sites, as befits its status as a capital of the kingdom. Ancient structures and abandoned agricultural lands are concentrated on the east shore.

## A Thousand Stones

About 32 kilometers (20 miles) south of Dangra Yumtsho is a site called Sumbug Doring, with at least

The Drokpa – yak and sheep herders who are at home in the sprawling Changthang region of the Tibetan Plateau – are descendants of the Shang Shung Pa, a mysterious people who built an ancient civilization that flourished there until about 1,300 years ago. The Drokpa wander across the rugged terrain at altitudes of more than 4,600 meters (15,000 feet) above sea level.





1,000 upright stones, or stelae, that range in height from 0.3 to 1.5 meters (one to five feet). On the southeast side of the lake are the ruins of Chugtsho Trogpo, a fort believed to have been founded in the time of Shang Shung. This was a large, hilltop complex of at least 30 buildings that rivaled in size the big forts of central Tibet.

A nearby salt lake called Teri Nam Tsho ("Sky Lake of Variegated Mountains") takes its name from four different-colored mountains that surround it. In Buddhist mythology, these four mountains were used to pin down the demoness of the lake. However, in the older Bon mythology, the mountains are the servants of the goddess of the lake.

## Mountain of Iron

Three of the mountains are home to pre-Buddhist settlements founded no later than the close of the Shang Shung period, and probably much earlier. This is clearly established by the lack of water on the island settlements: They could only have been viable when Teri Nam Tsho was potable. The lake, according to Chinese studies, was fresh



Founder's House is the largest structure in an ancient village that once held at least a dozen homes. Founder's House, its interior pictured here, was divided into six or seven rooms and used carved stones up to 1.5 meters (five feet) long for rafters, which supported the roof. The village was among many settlements around lake Teri Nam Tsho.

7,000 years ago but has since become progressively saltier.

Near the black Mountain of Iron is Do Drilbu ("Bell Headland"), an ancient island now connected to the mainland by a narrow, five-kilometer (three-mile) isthmus. The island holds the remains of at least a dozen homes, a 45-meter-long (150-foot) structure of many rooms, various shrines, and several small pillars rooted in the ground. The ruins are among the best preserved I have discovered. The largest residence has most of its stone roof intact. Stones up to 1.5 meters (five feet) in length were cut into rafters on which the stone

slabs of the roof rest. It was partitioned into six or seven rooms.

Other Shang Shung sites have been found in northern and western Tibet, and many others must await discovery. Some of those may appear in the next few years, but excavation of some of the sites is a more important goal. Only when experts from many disciplines take up the search will the real extent and character of the Shang Shung civilization finally be revealed. Tibet still hides many ancient mysteries. □

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### Further Reading

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