

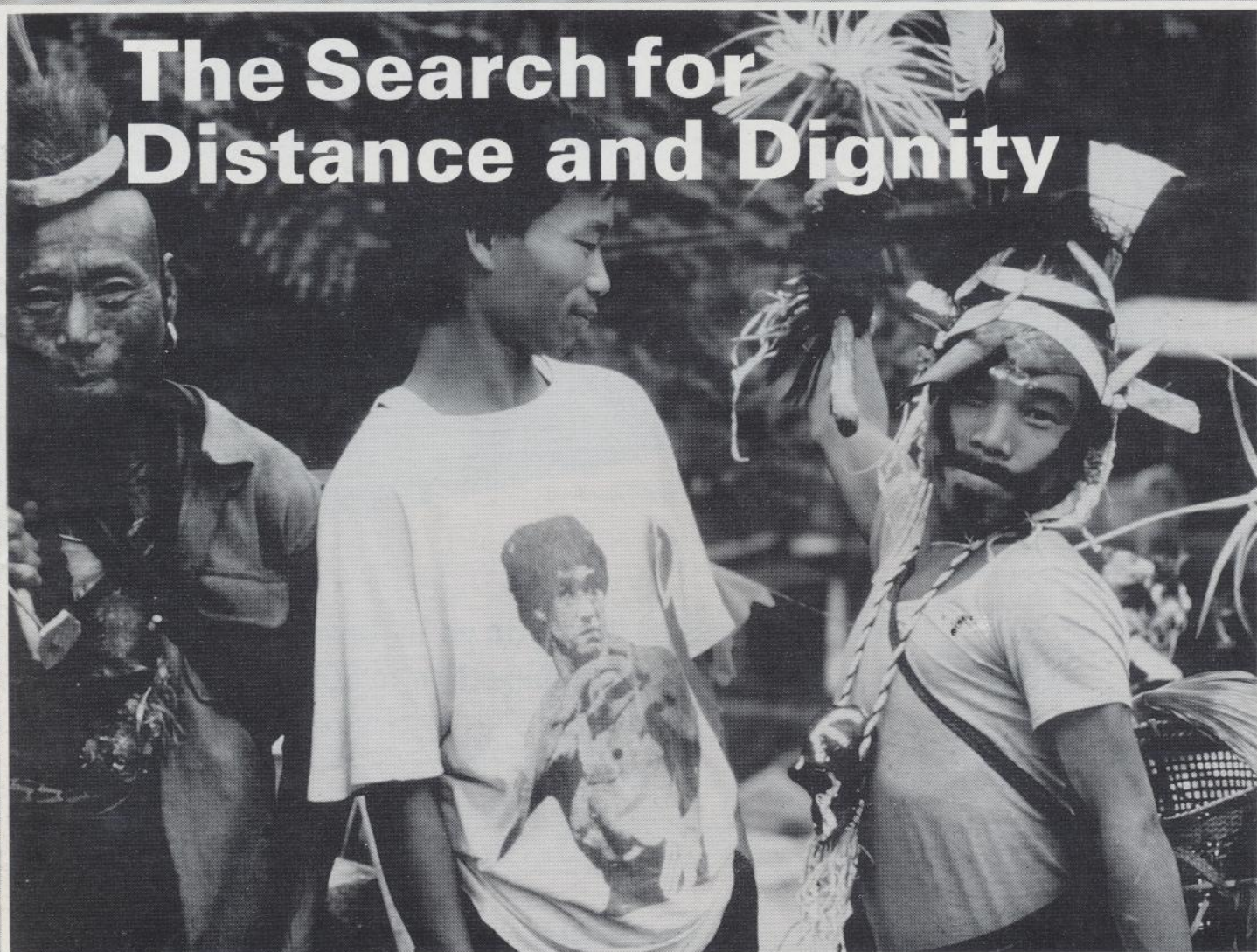
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# HIMAL

HIMALAYAN MAGAZINE

## Far Eastern Himalaya

### The Search for Distance and Dignity



Megalith to Chorten

Speak up for the Khas



*The Abode of Gods, King of  
Mountains, Himalaya  
You bound the oceans from  
east to west  
A northern yardstick  
To measure the Earth*  
— Kalidasa (Kumara Sambhava)

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## Far Eastern Himalaya The Search for Distance and Dignity by Sanjoy Hazarika

Why is the region of the Far Eastern Himalaya so mired in conflict? Because the people here do not feel part of the various nation states under whose boundaries they happen to fall.

Cover picture by Sanjay Acharya.  
Bruce Lee in t-shirt meets  
warrior in traditional attire  
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# Doring Revisited



*A prehistoric site of megaliths was discovered in Tibet's Chang Thang in the 1920s. A traveller who goes in search of it seventy years later comes up with chortens, and more chortens. What had happened?*

*by John Vincent Bellezza*

Tibet is a land that popular imagination has associated with magic and mystery. Even at an age when science dominates and the frontiers of the planet are clearly delineated, Tibet still shrouds a number of mysteries. This is nowhere more true than in the field of prehistory. While the first Tibetan historical documents, the Dunhuang manuscripts, date back to the 8th century, the Tibetan human legacy extends deep into the stone age. Bronze, Neolithic, Mesolithic and Palaeolithic sites have been discovered scattered across Tibet, from Ngari in the far west to Kham and Amdo in the east.

One of the first scholars to explore the prehistory of Tibet was George Roerich, the Russian-born son of the famous painter Nicholas Roerich. Between 1925 and 1928, George Roerich embarked on an ambitious journey to survey the prehistoric sites in the nomadic areas of the Asian hinterland. He mounted expeditions in search of prehistoric monuments to the Altai, Mongolia, Eastern Turkestan and Tibet. A major objective of these journeys, which together came to be known as the "Central Asiatic Expedition", was to explore "nomad barrows" (barrow = ancient grave mound).

Among the extensive discoveries of Roerich were 'slab graves' in Mongolia and

Namru in the Chang Thang, and the widespread incidence of a genre of ornamentation found throughout the nomadic regions in Central and North Asia which Roerich called the "Central Asian Animal Style". In addition, his expeditions discovered megaliths in Mongolia and on the Chang Thang.

Megalithic sites have also been located in Tibet by David Snellgrove, Giuseppe Tucci and Sonam Wangdu, but none have matched the spectacular site discovered by Roerich in 1928, in Namru, about 300 km northwest of Lhasa. Discovery of this site, at a place called Doring, became the crowning achievement of the Central Asiatic Expedition, which had



already accomplished so much groundbreaking work in archaeology and ethnology. In 1930, Roerich published a monograph with the Seminar-ium Kondakovianum, entitled "The Animal Style among the Nomad Tribes of Northern Tibet", describing the striking megalithic site of Doring. In the monograph, Roerich wrote:

"The expedition...was fortunate in discovering several megalithic monuments to the south of the Great Lakes. These were the first megalithic monuments discovered north of the Himalayas. In a place called Do-ring, situated some 30 miles to the south of the Great Salt Lake Pang gon tsho-cha, the expedition found important alignments consisting of 18 rows of stone slabs or menhirs, placed in parallel rows and running East and West. At the Western extremity of the alignment, was placed a cromlech or stone circle consisting of two concentric circles of menhirs or stone slabs. Inside the cromlech were situated three menhirs with a crude stone-table (lhatho) or altar in front of them. The central menhir was some 2.75 metres in height, had traces of butter libations, and I was told by a local headman that the stone was the abode of a lha or god protecting the route and travellers. The place is named Do-ring, after this menhir. The headman considered the alignments to be natural formations. If one compares the famous megalithic monuments of Carnac in France with the megaliths discovered in Tibet, one is at once struck by the remarkable similarity of the two sets of monuments. The Carnac alignments run from east to west and have at their Western extremity a cromlech or circle of stones. The Doring monuments have precisely the same arrangement."

### Zhangmo Gonpa

Upon reading this account of Doring, this writer became excited with the idea of visiting the site and carefully documenting it. The thought of a megalithic site in Chang Thang resembling another in the north of France was intriguing, and Doring was well worth a trip. As a traveller and writer of Tibet, I also hoped by visiting Doring to

come to a better understanding of the ancient origins of Tibetan civilisation.

To my knowledge, no Westerner had visited the Doring site since George Roerich first discovered it nearly 70 years ago. I only hoped that it had withstood the ravages of the Cultural Revolution. Roerich had believed that Doring was a kind of temple used by a "native cult". With the strides made by Tibetan studies in the fields of archaeology, mythology, religion and cosmology since Roerich's time, it should be possible to present a more detailed picture of Doring.

On 7 May 1994, I left Katmandu overland for Tibet with full expeditionary gear and research materials. In Lhasa, I sought out and met Sonam Wangdu, Director of the Administrative Commission for Museums and Archaeology Data in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and Adjunct

which includes an account of the discovery of Doring. This book would serve as my guide to rediscover Doring. The 1928 expedition, with fully laden camels and yaks, headed in a westerly direction from the capital of Namru Province called Namru Dzong, which is today the county seat of Palgon. Armed with the geographic data encapsulated in Roerich's detailed work, I too arrived in Palgon, and set out to find Doring.

I travelled alone on foot, quite a contrast to Roerich's heavily laden expedition, but very effective in terms of the distance one can cover. Travelling solo, I found, also facilitated contact with the drokpa, the nomads of the Chang Thang plateau. Following the directions given in *Trails in Innermost Tibet*, I skirted the northwest corner of Namtsho lake, passed the drokpa settlement of Shungchen, and made it to the



The patch to the right of the jeep constitutes the hundred cairns of Chorten Gyapa.

Professor in the History Department of Sichuan University. Wangdu, who is recognised as the foremost authority on the archaeology of Tibet, told me that there were megalithic sites in Saga and Nagarze counties as well as in Lhatse and Nagtshang, but that he was not familiar with one called Doring, nor with any megaliths south of the Pangong and Ziling lakes. He did not have knowledge of Roerich's work and its reference to Doring. I reasoned that Doring could have been discovered by a mapping team and never reported to the archaeological establishment.

In 1931, George Roerich published *Trails in Innermost Tibet* (Yale University Press),

Bonpo enclave of Potshe, with its landmark blue-grey mountain with a flat top. Arriving on the northern shores of Churu Tsho (Coral Lake), which until the Chinese invasion of Tibet had supported several Bonpo hermitages, I followed Zhang Chu upstream. Climbing up a small pass called Marokhumchen La, I had an excellent view of the snow giant Nyechenthang Lha, 85 km to the south-east. I was now in the Zhang Chu basin, utterly enveloped by the vast Chang Thang landscape.

I figured my best chance of reaching Doring was to seek guidance at the Zhangmo Gonpa, which by correlating Roerich's route descriptions with my maps I estimated was



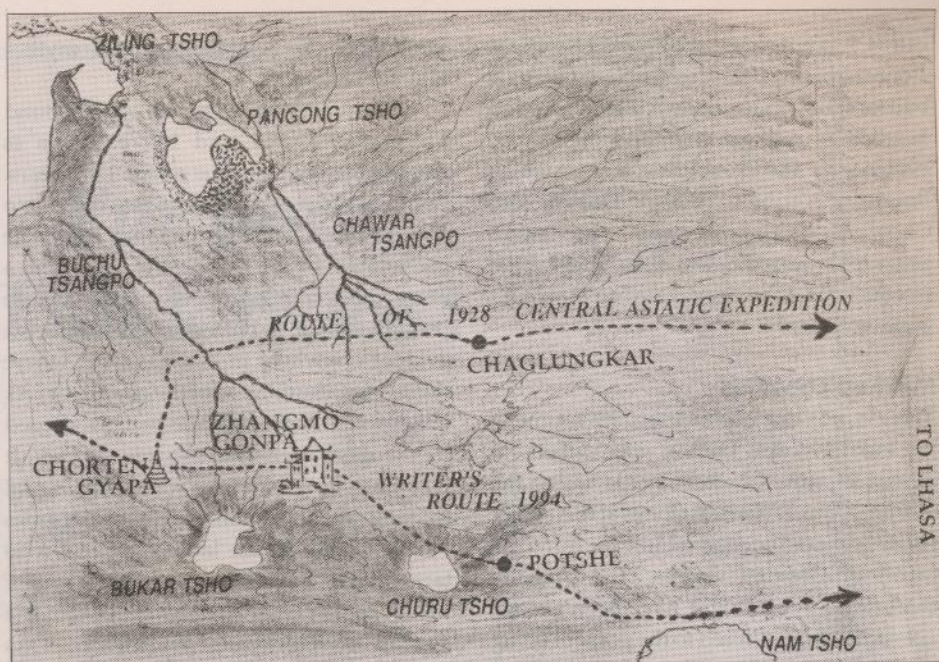
no more than 40 km east of Doring—a short distance on the Chang Thang.

Zhangmo is a Nyingmapa monastery that is in the process of being rebuilt. The two young reincarnate lamas of Zhangmo, Lama Gochen and Lama Gochung, were welcoming and patiently answered all my questions. I was disappointed to learn that they did not know of the existence of a site such as the one described by Roerich. Not only was an authority like Sonam Wangdu in Lhasa unaware of Doring, but the same was the case here in the very area where Doring is supposed to be, with two of the most knowledgeable men of the region.

Over the course of the day, Lama Gochen and Lama Gochung summoned drokpas from the area to inquire about Doring, a supposed complex of menhirs laid out in rows and circles, they explained to the locals. With utmost deference, the lay folk would approach the two tulkus and humbly insist on their ignorance about Doring. That evening, the two lamas confronted me and stated that positively no such place, nor any complex of menhirs, existed thereabouts. Lama Gochung then added, as an aside, "Remember when you came I said that you must have come looking for Guru Rinpoche's Chorten Gyapa?"

I was perplexed. I had located the rivers and valleys and other landmarks which led the way to Doring, but Doring itself seemed to have vanished into the rarefied Chang Thang air. Still, having come this distance, it would be interesting to visit Chorten Gyapa.

The next morning, the two reincarnate lamas, three attendants and myself squeezed into a Chinese-made jeep and headed westward across a bone-rattling plain, towards Chorten Gyapa. Leaving the Zhangmo basin, we entered the Burkar lake basin. To the north of our line of travel was a distinctive granite ridgeline, which surely was the "granite massif" circumvented by Roerich. On its summit are five pinnacles called Khadrode-Nga Choechen, "The Mountain of the Blissful Five Dakinis of the Great Dharma". This is the most obvious landmark of the vicinity. We then entered a narrow valley, described by Roerich as "sheltered by undulating hills". Precisely where Doring was to have been, was where Chorten Gyapa was located.



The paths taken by Roerich and writer Bellezza.

### Megaliths and Chortens

Chorten Gyapa, "One Hundred Chortens", consists of a hundred cairns (called *laptse* in Tibetan) in ten rows of ten. Each cairn is built of flat rocks heaped together with a small slab of rock sticking out of the top. The upper sections of the cairns are whitewashed. There is a central cairn which is built like the others but is bigger, almost three meters tall. It is surmounted by a vertical stone projecting half a meter beyond. Prayer flags are strung from it to adjoining cairns, and yak horns and yarn are placed on its side as votive offerings.

Lama Gochung explained the significance of Chorten Gyapa to me. Each of the 100 cairns represents a bead of Guru Rinpoche's *mala*. The central cairn represents the *bindu*, or largest bead, of the mala. One day, a *srinmo* or ogress living in Burkar Tsho threatened to flood the entire region and displace the encamped drokpa. The locals, who were at the mercy of the *srinmo*, sought help from Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava, the tantric adept and exorcist. Guru Rinpoche agreed to help the besieged people and travelled to Burkar Tsho. He neutralised the power of the *Srinmo* by determining where the heart or life-force of the ogress was located. It happened to be where Chorten Gyapa now stands. The small hills on either side of Chorten Gyapa are the *srinmo*'s breasts, hence called Numari ("Breast Mountain").

Guru Rinpoche, with the assistance of his tutelary deities, bound the ogress to the earth by pinning her heart down. This he accomplished by striking his mala on the ground which magically was transformed into the hundred cairns of Chorten Gyapa. From that time on, the *srinmo*, representing one of the many malevolent forces subdued by Guru Rinpoche in Tibet, could cause no more harm to the drokpa. One of the most important Guru Rinpoche sites of Namru, Chorten Gyapa was nevertheless overlooked by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution because they regarded it as worthless and remote.

The story of the ogress and local beliefs notwithstanding, geographic evidence suggests that Chorten Gyapa is the site of Doring. The location of key landmarks, valleys, passes, rivers and lakes leaves no doubt that this was the location identified by Roerich in 1928. The field data I have compiled on the geography of Chorten Gyapa correlates with the physical and cultural data derived from the U.S. Defence Agency 1:50,000 Tactical Pilotage charts, as well as the Tibetan language maps published by the Chinese. The evidence is irresistible; Doring is Chorten Gyapa. However, by no stretch of imagination does Chorten Gyapa resemble a megalithic site. Here there were no cromlechs, menhirs or circles of stone as per Roerich's description. Furthermore, the chorten complex is conceived as a unit of 100



cairns. It is not round with rows of upright stones radiating out. Also, Chorten Gyapa is built of small stones, each of which could be handled by a single man, and there is no evidence of the monolithic stones which Roerich describes. Though Doring and Chorten Gyapa occupy the same geographic coordinates, they share little resemblance. What happened to Roerich's megalithic site?

### Mic-hos, Lha-chos

There is only one explanation. Sometime in the last 70 years, Doring was purposely altered to create Chorten Gyapa. Using the old megaliths as the root stones at their base, the drokpas of the region built the hundred cairns of Chorten Gyapa. The original character of what might have been a stone age site has been altered to the point of being unrecognisable. In order to invest new meaning and significance into Doring, the site was transformed into a testament of Guru Rinpoche's magical powers and prowess. The haunts of a local aboriginal deity was elaborated upon to better conform with the tenets of Vajrayana

Buddhism. The architecture and mythology was altered.

The process of legend-building around Padmasambhava and his exploits is something that has gone on for 1300 years. In the complex set of factors that come into play, at some juncture, the Guru Rinpoche connotation of the Doring site, related to a more 'modern religion', eclipsed the more primitive layer of beliefs. This is a process evident elsewhere in Tibet as well, where the *mi-chos*, the religion of the people, or folk religion with its aboriginal aspects, is eclipsed by the more organised modern *lha-chos*. It was Guru Rinpoche who was instrumental in taming the chaotic terrestrial forces which inhabited the landscape and who tamed these elemental forces and brought order to the world, which led to the spread of Vajrayana Buddhism. This victory of one force over the other also seems to have occurred in Doring as well, in the way cairns have overwhelmed the megaliths.

There is no question of fraud or misrepresentation on the part of Roerich, for the site was photographed by his team.

This is a case of planned and purposeful modification of the architectural character of an ancient monument by those who set about building the hundred cairns.

How many other such prehistoric monuments may have been effaced, not by the ravages of time nor the violence of the Cultural Revolution, but by the overweening efforts of the Tibetans themselves, to rewrite their history in order to bring it more in line with Vajrayana orthodoxy? This is an important question if we are to better understand how cultures remould themselves, reflecting changing conditions and values. At some time, someone made a decision that Doring should be more than the dwelling place of an aboriginal deity. Through this effort, the hold of Buddhism on Tibet has increased by a small measure, but at the same time a vital link of the people to their ancient history was obliterated.

△

J. V. Bellezza is a traveller of the Western Himalaya and Tibet.

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