

The use of Tibetan textual and ethnographic sources to Identify symbolic and ideological elements in Pre-Buddhist monuments, rock art and artefacts in Upper Tibet

John Vincent Bellezza

Introduction

Anthropological enquiry in Tibet has long been dominated by Buddhist perspectives, overshadowing fundamental aspects of its historical and cultural makeup. On the other hand, the monographs and articles submitted for inspection here and the supporting body of academic work by the author focus on thematically pre-Buddhist or archaic (pre-10th century CE) cultural phenomena. My research has been motivated by a consensus in Tibetan studies that there exist large deficiencies concerning our knowledge of the cultural substrate of Tibet. To help overcome these limitations, I have gathered together archaeological and ethnographic evidence to plumb the historical and cultural significance of ancient Tibetan literature. A great deal of new findings and analyses have been made available through my interdisciplinary approach, setting a precedent in the fields of anthropology, archaeology and Tibetology.¹

Fieldwork for my study was mostly carried out in Upper Tibet, the vast western uplands. Known in Tibetan parlance as Tö and the Changthang, this is the highest and driest portion of the Tibetan Plateau. Upper Tibet comprises nearly one-third of the entire Tibetan Plateau (approximately 2.5 million km²). It is home to herders and farmers pursuing a traditional way of life that has enabled them to thrive in one

¹ For a synthesis of my archaeological, textual and ethnographic studies up to 2013 written for the educated layperson, see Bellezza 2014d. Concerning the origins of Tibetan civilization, it was already observed by two of the most prominent Tibetologists of the 20th century that Euro-Asiatic steppe influences reached northwestern Tibet in pre-Buddhist times (Roerich 1931; Tucci 1973), but hard evidence to confirm this opinion only emerged in the 1990s and 2000s with the launching of my archaeological surveys (and those of other research teams). The extensive scope of my pre-2001 fieldwork and the wealth of material collected for analysis was recognized by archaeologists such as Aldenderfer and Zhang (2004). My improved archaeological reconnaissance work in Upper Tibet over the following decade was described by Brandon Dotson (2013), a specialist in the Old Tibetan language, as a remarkable achievement. In his examination of libations rites, Dan Martin (2014), a leading expert on Tibet and the Bon religion, states that my work on localized popular practices and archaeological artifacts as evidence for deeply embedded cultural traits “has fundamentally shifted the course and scope of Tibetan studies”. Another luminary in Tibetan and Bon studies, Charles Ramble (2014), in his article on deer ritualism, calls attention to my study of Tibetan oracular traditions, characterizing it as a valuable contribution that underscores prime concepts and practices in Tibetan culture and religion. The doyen of Yungdrung Bon studies in the West, Per Kværne (2015), in a review of one of my monographs on Old Tibetan language texts writes, “Bellezza deserves the gratitude of all Tibetologists interested in the study of early, non-Buddhist rituals and beliefs in Tibet.”

of the harshest environments on earth. The earliest Tibetan historical records (8th to 10th centuries CE) refer to a kingdom called Zhang Zhung in Upper Tibet, which was defeated in the 640s by the king of Central Tibet, Songtsen Gampo. Historical and ritual sources written in the Old Tibetan language also outline the tribal and clan composition of Upper Tibet. Many origin myths, a fundamental part of the early ritual tradition, are set in Upper Tibet, strongly suggesting that this region was a cultural heartland where seminal customs and traditions arose.

In one sense, my documentation of archaeological sites in Upper Tibet is a continuation of work carried out by Western explorers in the first half of the 20th century. Sven Hedin in the 1900s (1909; 1934), George Roerich in the 1920s (1931) and Giuseppe Tucci in the 1930s (1935; 1973) traveled to highly remote Upper Tibet and recorded pre-Buddhist archaeological remains there. Utilizing modern means of scholarship combined with easier access to the region, I have systematized methods used in classifying visible evidence of past civilization, greatly expanding the scope of study. I have devised a typology and chronology of pre-Buddhist archaeological monuments and contextualized sites in Tibetan historical and folk traditions. Mark Aldenderfer, the only other Westerner to have conducted substantive archaeological research on early remains in Upper Tibet (2003; 2007; 2011), has pursued several avenues of research like my own. My documentation of ancient rock art in Upper Tibet follows in the footsteps of the Tibetan archaeologist, Sonam Wangdu (1994). Not only have I revisited most rock art sites included in Sonam Wangdu's survey, I have documented many others employing a refined set of esthetic, technical and chronological criteria. More recently, Quentin Devers (2015) adapted much of my survey methodology to his PhD dissertation devoted to the reconnaissance of archaeological sites in Ladakh.

The study of early Tibetan religious and cultural traditions was pioneered by scholars such as Snellgrove and Richardson (1968) and R. A. Stein (1971; 1972), who realized that the ideologies and practices described in Tibetan texts of the early historic period (ca. 700–1000 CE) also expressed themselves in later Classical Tibetan and ethnographic materials. Like these scholars, I too have used later sources as instruments of interpretation to shed light on the character of cultural and religious traditions in the early historic period. To reinforce the utility of Classical Tibetan accounts I have subjected them to painstaking comparison with Old Tibetan manuscripts of the early historic period. Similarly, in his collected articles, Samten Karmay (1998) investigates links between Tibetan religious traditions of the early historic period known as *bon* and the modern religion of Bon that arose circa 1000 CE, concluding that there are longstanding legacies in both written and oral traditions in Tibet. Finding much of merit in Karmay's understanding of historical continuity in Tibetan religion and culture, I have uncovered numerous instances of the recycling and repackaging of beliefs, myths and rituals stemming from the early historic period. Per Kværne (2004) recognized four distinct yet interconnected categories of non-Tibetan religious traditions: pre-Buddhist, royal cult of the early historic period, folk traditions, and the systematized Bon religion of the post-11th century CE. Adduced through many heretofore not well studied textual and ethnographic sources, my research supports Kværne's findings concerning different types of non-Buddhist religion in Tibet. I have further determined that pre-Buddhist religious traditions in Tibet were not necessarily autochthonous as commonly presupposed but closely aligned to those

from other parts of early Eurasia as well. My discovery of wider Eurasian cultural influences in pre-Buddhist Tibet is noted in scholarly works such as McKay 2015.

Methodology and findings

I exploit archaeological, textual and ethnographic methods and sources to elucidate correspondences between mythological concepts and ritual practices and the archaeological complexion of pre-Buddhist Upper Tibet. I consider how archaic mytho-ritual traditions contribute to an identification of symbolic and ideological components of funerary monuments, rock art and artifacts in Upper Tibet. Archaic mytho-ritual traditions also furnish a perspective on the numinous landscape in which these archaeological resources were embedded and they inform present-day cultural practices in Upper Tibet such as spirit-mediumship and the cult of mountain and lake deities. In my exposition of myth, ritual and archaeology and their ethnographic correlates, I divide the diverse abstract and physical resources examined into three methodological categories of materials, texts and lifeways:

1. The body of archaic (pre-10th century CE) monuments, rock art and artifacts documented through archaeological surveys and the study of collections.²
2. Old Tibetan manuscripts (8th to 11th century CE) and Yungdrung Bon texts (post-10th century CE) examined through the lens of the archaeological record.³
3. Identification of customs, traditions and beliefs of Upper Tibetan pastoralists and agriculturalists that resonate with archaeological and textual evidence.⁴

The three-pronged methodology I have devised has given rise to a clearer appraisal of Tibet's past. By drawing attention to the thematic coherence and the value of analyzing the three categories of enquiry in tandem, archaeological remains, literary texts, ritual practices, and sacred geographies are effectively joined in an allied field of study. The interrelationship between the various aspects of the study not only endow it with a singular thrust, but form the basis of an augmented interpretative framework.

The final sections of this essay are devoted to specific examples of my interdisciplinary methods and analyses and advances in the study of ancient Tibet.

Situating Upper Tibetan archaeological monuments in textual and ethnographic traditions: Bellezza 2008

In this monograph, I supply ethnographic materials for comparison with ancient Tibetan funerary texts, as a tool of analysis for determining their historical and cultural significance. I review hunting and pastoral customs in Upper Tibet as well as death rituals of contemporary cultures of the Himalaya,

² See Bellezza 1996; 1997, pp. 153–289, 362–419; 2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2008, pp. 15–199, 2011a; 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2016a; 2016b; forthcoming-a; forthcoming-b; in press-b; in press-c.

³ See Bellezza 1997, pp. 21–137, 293–349; 2008, pp. 201–542, 579–650; 2010; 2014c.

⁴ See Bellezza 2005; 2012; 2015b; in press-a.

Siberia and other Inner Asian regions are reviewed. Linkages between the ethnographic and textual records highlight the persistent nature of cognate cultural practices and beliefs. Although the specific causal agents of these parallels are still largely veiled, at least in some cases, broad transmissions through time and space are indicated.

This monograph is underpinned by a comprehensive survey of visible pre-Buddhist monuments and rock art in Upper Tibet carried out by the author, which expounds upon their morphological, functional, chronological, folkloric, and cross-cultural traits. Many of these monuments and rock art are located near sacred mountains and lakes, the residences of territorial and ancestral deities. These sacred associations act as one avenue for explaining the localization of these archaeological assets. Excerpts from the monograph considered in this essay pertain to archaic funerary monuments. These pillars, enclosures, subterranean tombs, mounds, and mortuary temples are widely distributed in Upper Tibet, geographically delineating a distinctive archaeological culture. Radiocarbon dating of associated organic remains and cross-cultural analysis of comparable funerary monuments in other regions of Inner Asia I have conducted suggest that the Upper Tibetan variants were being erected as early as 900 BCE (Late Bronze Age; also see Bellezza 2016a).

Two types of funerary monuments in Upper Tibet, walled-in pillars and rows of pillars appended to a temple-tomb, are often referred to as Mon-tho in the oral tradition of Upper Tibet. Mon is an ethnonym of an ancient group thought to have inhabited Upper Tibet before being annihilated in a pandemic. Although this tradition is apocryphal in nature, in archaic funerary rites *tho* are registers erected during the valediction of souls. An account of *tho* in a ritual text entitled *Klu 'bum nag po* (first composed ca.10th century CE) describes them as something that priests circled and passed through, just as might be expected of the Upper Tibetan funerary pillars. Moreover, archaic funerary texts refer to the functions and symbolism of sheep, yaks and horse sacrifices. Both sanctioned archaeological excavations and the plundering of tombs have uncovered bones of the same species, a point of convergence with textual accounts.

Old Tibetan funerary ritual texts (probably written in the 8th and 9th centuries CE) note horned headdresses for horses used to mystically transport the dead to the celestial afterlife. Avian features are attributed to these horns (the horned eagle is a totemic creature of Upper Tibet). According to later Yungdrung Bon accounts composed in Classical Tibetan, bird horns functioned to suppress evil forces attempting to block the dead from reaching the otherworld. In this monograph, I explore potential links between the horned headdresses of Tibetan literature and actual horned headdresses for horses discovered in Pazyryk and other Scytho-Siberian burial mounds (middle third of the first millennium BCE) and the problems raised by the large chronological and geographical disparities involved. I also discuss other parallels in funerary customs between Tibet and the Scythian world to the north. 'Animal style' rock art and artifacts have been discovered in Upper Tibet, suggesting areas of contact that may help explain striking similarities between the funerary traditions of medieval Tibet and prehistoric Scytho-Siberia (also see Bellezza 2016b).

Interpreting Upper Tibetan funerary pillars and portable objects through archaic ritual texts: Bellezza 2013a

Death in childbirth is one of the perennial tragedies facing humanity. A historical insight into the very sensitive nature of this subject is provided by an Old Tibetan text, written circa 850–1000 CE. It describes the dreadful experiences of women who die in such a manner. In this monograph, I furnish a translation and analysis of the battery of rituals conducted for those who perished in childbirth, revealing reference to many different kinds material objects. These include registers (*tho*) that were erected to open the way to the heavens and the deployment of ritual visages, objects that appear to be attested in the archaeological record of Upper Tibet. In the text they are part of elaborate funerals in which women consigned to hell by demons are freed by the labors of specialist priests. Golden visages are noted in Yungdrung Bon texts and in recent years several golden death masks have been discovered in western Tibet and adjoining Himalayan regions. Dating from circa 100 BCE to 500 CE, these golden masks hint at a long pedigree for the custom of fabricated visages noted in Tibetan archaic funerary literature (also see Bellezza 2013b).

Discerning living links to the ancient past in Upper Tibet: Bellezza 2011b

Questions of historical continuity in Tibetan culture and religion have long been debated. In this article, I scrutinize aspects of the tradition of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet in relation to a widely-held local belief that the embodying of deities is of considerable antiquity (also see Bellezza 2015b; 2012). While the evidence presented does not establish the historical origins of the tradition, it appears that certain invocations, procedures, spirits, and tools propagated by the mediums are derived from pre-Buddhist sources. Similar lore and cultural motifs, like mediums flying on drums and transforming themselves into wild animals (therianthropy), are recorded in Yungdrung Bon texts composed between the 11th and 15th centuries CE. These written sources also purport that such traditions originated in the remote past, lending more credence to an early genesis for the analogous oral tradition.

Prospects for further enquiry

My efforts to clarify the cultural character and scope of pre-Buddhist Tibet are based on more than 25 years of intensive fieldwork, translation and archival research. Much can be built upon this pioneering endeavor by scholars from diverse disciplines addressing the many questions raised by my work.

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