

Bellezza, John Vincent, *Besting the Best: Warriors and Warfare in the Cultural and Religious Traditions of Tibet. A Historical, Ethnographic and Archaeological Survey of Martialism Over the Last Three Millennia*, Lumbini (Lumbini International Research Institute), 2020. xvi+563 pp.

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Probably no scholar has so intensively and consistently studied the cultural pre-history and early history of what can broadly speaking be defined as Ladakh and Western Tibet as John V. Bellezza. The volume under review, entitled *Besting the Best*, deals, as the sub-title indicates, with the culture and history of martialism in this region over a long time-span, but it deals with much else besides, such as religion, economy, and migration. The author brings decades of dedicated research, including extensive field studies, to this book, which is not only highly readable, but includes a unique and vast visual documentation consisting of no less than 335 illustrations, many in colour and coming from the author's personal photographic archive. Although the topic is complex and involves wide-ranging research sometimes far from the core area of the author's field research, an area which he designates 'Upper Tibet', the structure of the book is clear and the reader does not lose her or his way moving through millennia and over vast distances.

It is useful to keep in mind the chronological parameters, as defined by Bellezza, comprising four main periods, as they will be referred to in this review: 1) Late Prehistoric era, ca. 1300 BCE-600 CE; 2) Historic era, ca. 600-1000 CE, including the Imperial period, ca. 600 to 850 CE; 3) Vestigial period, ca. 1000-1350 CE; 4) Late Historic period, ca. 1350-1950 CE (p. 23). Likewise, a brief overview of the sources utilised by the author may be useful: 1) Old Tibetan manuscripts, principally from Dunhuang, to which must be added imperial and other proclamations inscribed on stelas and rocks; 2) rock art in Upper Tibet, ca. 1200 BCE to 1300 CE; 3) various small metal objects, especially *thog lcags*, probably largely of a talismanic kind, ca. 1200 BCE to 1300 CE; 4) various stone structures, especially strongholds and necropolises, ca. 1200 BCE to 600 CE; and finally, 5) relevant material from areas adjacent to the Tibetan Plateau, especially from North Inner Asia.

Three further observations should be made: first, 'Upper Tibet' is a geographical term, as it is only in the Historic era that 'Tibet' as a polity or a state emerged as the centre of the Tibetan Empire, starting ca. 600 CE. The area referred to as 'Upper Tibet' in fact (according to Old Tibetan historical documents) "supported two kingdoms: Zhang-zhung and Sumpa", neither of which was initially in any sense Tibetan, although they ultimately became absorbed by the Tibetan Empire; second, the term 'Vestigial period' points back in time following the preceding Imperial Period, from which it preserved vestiges; and third, in spite of the above observation, there is a significant degree of cultural continuity in 'Upper Tibet' (and, indeed, on the entire Tibetan Plateau) from the Late Prehistoric era until today, as exemplified by the perfection of horseback riding, which "reached Upper Tibet from the north in the Late Bronze Age [1300-700 BCE]" (p. 11). The 'Vestigial period' is in fact very important; it coincides with what is usually known as the 'Later Propagation (of Buddhism)', and is also the time when Yungdrung Bön arose as a coherent, self-conscious religious tradition, as Bellezza indirectly points out when stating that this religion "did not appear until the 10th and 11th centuries CE" (p. 187).

Yungdrung Bön is not without importance for the present study, for a number of ritual, mythological, and historiographical texts belonging to this religion contain reminiscences from the Imperial period. However, Bellezza reminds the reader that:

These sources place great emphasis on the political history of Central Tibet and its various proto-states and rulers beginning deep in prehistory... However, most events and personalities of early times are heavily mythologized... A major function of ahistorical elements in tales of prehistory was to exalt the status of rulers and prominent clans of later times, endorsing their religious and political ideologies and activities through the mantle of antiquity and ancestral privilege (p. 4).

At the very beginning of Chapter 6, entitled "Prehistoric Martial Traditions in Tibetan Literature", he makes a similar statement which has crucial methodological implications:

With the means for historical corroboration of literary materials mostly beyond our reach, Tibetan tales set in early times are indeterminate records of any actual past occurrences... They are however not without their merits, for they furnish a vivid picture of how Tibetans, beginning in the Early Historic period and continuing until recent times, perceived their prehistory (p. 175).

Furthermore:

Establishing the origin of ancient customs and traditions was a preoccupation of many Tibetan writers, who often reduced them to historical clichés to fit the needs at hand (p. 188).

Other, less critical authors, would do well to bear these statements in mind.

Given the complexity of this book, it is impossible to present every part of it with the attention it would merit, but even a brief chapter-by-chapter outline will indicate its importance for a wide range of topics.

Chapter 1, "Violence and War in Buddhism", explores "A conundrum ...in Buddhist thought as killing is categorically seen as negative but has been sanctioned out of compassion (p. 26)". This problem has been explored by Jacob P. Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (New Haven, 2011), but is here further discussed by Bellezza, who also refers to the extensive material available concerning the army of the pre-modern Lhasa government. To the latter topic should be added Alice Travers, *Marching into View: the Tibetan Army in Historic Photographs (1895-1959)*, Potsdam (Edition-Tethys), 2022.

Chapter 2, "Violence and Martialism in Tibetan Societies", continues this theme, but with a focus 'on the ground' so to speak, i.e. discussing how "Acts of bellicosity permeated all rungs of Tibetan societies. These extended to the foot soldier, domestic defender, raider, hunter, and bandit, as well as to the clergy and ruling classes" (p. 35). This is, obviously, a statement that flies in the face of the conception of Tibetan society through the centuries as permeated by the Buddhist ideals of non-violence. Bellezza's book is a welcome and well-documented rejection of this conception which, no matter how widely held by many Tibetans as well as well-meaning non-Tibetans today, has little foundation in historical or ethnographic reality. He discusses "The warlike proclivities of pastoralists in the northern grasslands (pp. 36 ff.)", quoting the anthropologist Robert B. Ekvall: "The nomadic pastoralists are well-fitted for... warfare for their habits, the exigencies of their subsistence technique, and their whole pattern of life is an effective training in the essentials of warfare (p. 37)". He also discusses the arrow, "the single most important armament and military symbol in the Tibetan world (p. 48 ff.)", but also other weapons, based on Tibetan texts and ethnographic material from many parts of the Tibetan Plateau. He points out that "The collective skills acquired by stockbreeders through hunting were directly applicable to military organization and campaigns (p. 40)", and quotes pertinent written sources, such as forthright glorifications of the deadly qualities of the bow and arrow in – for example – the Gesar epic (p. 43).

Chapter 3, “The Divine Companions of Warriors”, shifts the focus to presenting a series of warlike protector deities “who appear in the guise of traditional Tibetan warriors”, wearing armour and helmets and wielding various weapons (p. 59). Among these deities are the so-called ‘mountain gods’ (*yul lha* as well as *gnyan*), whose close connection with ransom rituals and divination is discussed. Bellezza draws on a range of textual sources from the Imperial period, but also later sources in which the “martial splendor of mountain gods” is presented at length (pp. 79 ff.).

Chapter 4, “The Quintessential Warrior Spirits” continues this theme, focusing more specifically on the *dgra lha* (*dgra bla* in Old Tibetan texts, *sgra bla* in Yungdrung Bön, see pp. 95 ff.). Many scholars have discussed this class of spirits or deities (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Tucci, Karmay), but Bellezza’s discussion in the present volume is, at least to the best of this reviewer’s knowledge, the most extensive and incisive discussion of them to date.

Moving on from the ideological/religious background to a historical and social context, Chapter 5, “Imperial Warriors and Warfare in Tibetan Literature”, is a particularly important chapter: “This chapter examines wartime personnel and activities of the Imperial period as documented in both primary and secondary sources of the Tibetan literary tradition (p. 105)”. Although some sources regarding military matters date from the Imperial period, the majority of the sources referred to are of later provenance, and the author rightly stresses (cf. above) that caution must be exercised when using them, also because there is limited archaeological evidence available from the Imperial period. Nevertheless, with these limitations in mind, Bellezza, using a wide range of textual sources, succeeds in giving a coherent and often detailed account of the military organisation in the Imperial period. In particular, he relies on a hitherto little-studied text, the *sPu rgyal Bod kyi dmag khrims*, “a manual of military regulations and protocols dating to the Imperial period” (p. 118). This fascinating text certainly would merit a monographic study; in this review it is only possible to say that it contains, among other things, a “contemporaneous elaboration of senior military grades and their adjutants” (p. 121); penalties, taxes, and rewards; various battle scenarios; the special regard that should be shown to Buddhist practitioners and objects; how to avoid unnecessary casualties and strategic setbacks; and elaborate rules for reserving the spoils of battle for those who actually participated in combat (p. 139). There are sections of intelligence gathering, nocturnal combat, signalling, and much else. This chapter also deals with the “accoutrements of the warrior in the time of empire” (p. 154): weapons (especially the bow and arrow), armour, and helmets. The important role played by the

horse and by cavalry is discussed, as is its function in funerary traditions.

In Chapter 6, "Prehistoric Martial Traditions in Tibetan Literature", many authors might tread on unsafe ground. However, as has been made clear above, Bellezza avoids pitfalls when it comes to Tibetan 'quasi-historical' and ritual texts as he navigates through topics such as "The martial foundations of the Tibetan political dispensation" and "The warlike deeds of prehistoric kings and priests".

The final three chapters shift the emphasis from literary (and ethnographic) sources to archaeology, and provide valuable, indeed unique, overviews over several categories of archaeological material. Although there is certainly some chronological overlapping, this material essentially relates to the Late Prehistoric era, for which, as already noted, contemporaneous written sources are lacking. Thus Chapter 7 deals with armaments and other martial symbols, containing descriptions, drawings, and photographs of a range of relevant objects, including the so-called *thog lcags*, figurative objects of copper alloy, unfortunately, as the author observes, of unknown provenance and function. They do, however, provide visual data, as the anthropomorphic figurines are depicted clad in suits of armour and often holding swords or daggers. Some *thog lcags* also depict wild animals or horseback riders. This chapter continues, to some extent, the topic of Chapter 6.

Chapters 8 and 9 are of particular importance as they present and discuss a rich material, largely photographs which Bellezza has collected himself *in situ* during his extended study tours in Upper Tibet. This material mainly concerns the Late Prehistoric era, i.e. ca. 1300 BCE-600 CE. In the first part of Chapter 8, the author looks at the interconnected phenomena of "horses, monuments, war, and socio-political complexity in Inner Asia" in the Late Prehistoric era (p. 239), providing a cultural-historical background for "the introduction of horseback riding and mobile pastoralism in Upper Tibet and consequent major sociopolitical and economic changes" (p. 245). These changes are then illustrated and discussed under two headings, viz. "Large stone grid necropolises in Upper Tibet" and "Hilltop fortifications in Upper Tibet". Some of the latter structures have previously been studied by other scholars, especially archaeologists, but there has been a tendency to over-emphasize the fact that "Hilltop sites are commonly construed by local Tibetans as being ruined castles (*mkhar*) and fortresses (*rdzong*)" (p. 277), such as the famous Khyunglung dNgul-mkhar in present-day rTswa-mda' County in Western Tibet. In Yungdrung Bön textual and oral sources it is said to have been founded by sTon-pa gShen-rab and to have been the capital of the Zhang-zhung kingdom. However, Bellezza makes the important point

that narratives concerning such “strongholds of Zhang-zhung is a retrospective interpretation which presents them in schematic fashion and refracted through Lamaist [*i.e.* *Yungdrung Bön – PKv*] religious doctrine... Tibetan textual sources are nearly bereft of a historical framework for explicating their chronology and political and military functions” (p. 295). Bellezza is to be lauded for adhering strictly to this methodological approach when dealing with Tibetan sources purportedly dealing with the prehistoric era. It does not mean that such sources are without value (and may reflect certain reminiscences and traces from prehistoric times), but they generally reflect agendas and narratives from what Bellezza calls the Vestigial period, ca. 1000-1350 CE.

Having said this, it must be emphasized that Chapter 8 contains an extraordinary rich collection of material – Bellezza has carried out preliminary surveys of 146 summit sites... identified as archaic or potentially archaic, of which the chapter presents a rich visual documentation, discussion and analysis.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, presents “Martialism and Combat in the Rock Art of the Tibetan Plateau and North Inner Asia”. It is illustrated by numerous photographs and drawings, published as well as unpublished. Although the rock art of Upper Tibet, Spiti and Ladakh has numerous motifs, including various animals, Bellezza’s focus here is on combat-related art, such as warriors on horseback or on foot, as well as chariots with charioteers wielding a range of weapons. A number of North Inner Asian examples of rock art depicting combat are provided for the sake of comparison.

Dating rock art is always difficult, but Bellezza argues credibly that at least the North Inner Asian chariot carvings may belong to the Bronze Age, and hence be as early as the middle of the second millennium BCE (p. 367). In any case, they must be ancient, as they seem to have disappeared throughout North Inner Asia with the emergence of riding horses (*ibid.*). There would seem to be no particular reason to believe that combat (or ritual) chariots lingered on in Tibet beyond that period (although archaeological finds may of course lead to a re-assessment of this view in the future).

The “warrior and warrior-related material in Upper Tibet (Byangthang and Stod)” is presented in an abundantly illustrated and almost book-length “Catalogue of Rock Art Images” (pp. 405-506), containing no less than 203 photographs in colour, a veritable gold mine for further research.

John V. Bellezza’s book, *Besting the Best*, is systematic in its approach to a very complicated material and convincing in its discussion of the same material. It also has a series of other, excellent characteristics: it avoids technical or academic jargon, and is very readable; it will

interest not only students and scholars of Tibetan history and prehistory, but is relevant to a much wider range of scholarship, including the anthropology and sociology of war and martialism; it is very carefully researched, with a large number of immensely useful notes, including references to a wide range of relevant sources. As the author writes (p. 401), this book is concerned with the theme of temporal continuity in Tibetan cultures (thus spanning pre-Buddhist as well as Buddhist periods), and from that perspective adds significantly to a growing body of research (e.g. Alice Travers, Jacob P. Dalton) which establishes the martial and violent aspects of Tibetan culture from prehistoric times until recent decades (when a narrative of Tibet as profoundly Buddhist, and hence essentially non-violent, started gaining ascendancy).

Although a few scholars – including George Roerich and Giuseppe Tucci – have previously touched on the same material as Bellezza explores in this book (with the exception of rock art in Tibet, which, as opposed to ruined fortresses, was largely unexplored before Bellezza initiated his exploration in the field in the early 1990's), no Western scholar can match the range and volume of his documentation of early archaeological monuments and rock art in Upper Tibet, including Ladakh. There are, however, useful volumes illustrating Tibetan rock art (from various periods), such as *Bod kyi brag brkos ri mo'i sgyu rtsal/ Art of Tibetan Rock Paintings: Compiled by the Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region*, Chengdu (Sichuan People's Publishing House), 1994.¹

Two further publications by Bellezza should be mentioned. The first is *Drawn and Written in Stone: An inventory of stepped structures and inscriptions on rock surfaces in Upper Tibet (ca.100 BCE to 1400 CE)*, Oxford (BAR Publishing), 2020. Here a category of prehistoric structures is examined, which, as Bellezza convincingly argues, have their origins in the Late Prehistoric era as structures built for ritual and symbolic purposes, and later, starting in the Imperial period, were transformed into the Buddhist stūpa. The book provides a rich photographic documentation of such structures *in situ*, as well as depicted in rock art. The second publication is *A Comprehensive Survey of Rock Art in Upper Tibet: Volume 1. Eastern Byang thang*, Oxford (Archaeo Press Publishing), 2023, which focuses on the area surrounding Lake gNam-mtsho north of Lhasa. This is announced as the first of a set of five volumes.

It is not an unreasonable expectation that the volume under review, together with related volumes by the same author, will, over time, give

¹ Subsequently a considerable number of books and articles on archaeology in Western Tibet have been published in Chinese.

a new impetus and lead to significantly deeper understanding of the prehistory and early history of Tibet. The published volumes are by themselves an achievement for which John V. Bellezza is to be congratulated.

