

Mon and its Tibeto-Burman neighbours: a reassessment of its epigraphic record in Burma A.D. 1000–1400

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The recovery of two Mon epigraphs in the late 1990s shattered previously held assumptions, originally promulgated by G. H. Luce, not only about the absolute chronology and diffusion of Mon language-use in early 'Burma' but also about the nature of language-contacts with its Tibeto-Burman neighbours, notably Burmese and Tircul (Pyu).

One inscription, from Pagán (mound no. 1216, recovered in 1996), dated AD 1129, with supplementary lines in Old Burmese of AD 1224, together with a number of subsequent epigraphs, suggests continuing Mon language-use in Central Burma after Cañsû I (Alaungsithu), the end of whose reign was previously held to be the cut-off point.

The other inscription, recovered in 1999 from beneath a stupa at a site on the lower eastern rim of the Irrawaddy Delta, dated AD 1362, is significant in two respects: (1) It is the earliest Middle Mon text so far, until then assumed to begin with the Kyaikmaraw inscription of AD 1455 (near Moulmein); (2) It is the first tangible evidence of an earlier onset of Mon presence in the delta than hitherto acknowledged.

This contribution examines and re-evaluates Mon epigraphic evidence from all parts of Burma – Pagán, the Delta, lower western Sittang, lower western Salween and Tavoy – between the 11th and the 14th centuries. Not only will primary Mon data be newly assessed but also the records of the Archaeological Survey, Burma, to create a more refined and reliable profile as to the chronology, areal distribution and typology of these early texts. This profile will be matched with corresponding early Burmese data.

In the second part concrete contact phenomena with Tibeto-Burman languages are to be examined:

A. Tircul (Pyu):

(1) Can Tircul (Pyu) 'relative clause' constructions be attributed to Mon contact?

B. Old (and Middle ?) Burmese:

(1) Mon-Burmese grammatical markers – which way were they borrowed? (2) The Mon-Burmese graphic -ui- vocalism; (3) Mon abbreviatory rhyme spellings, their chronology and relationship with Burmese – a new framework for the dating of texts.

C. Periodization

(1) A new periodization of Mon;

(2) Is a periodization of Burmese possible?