

PAINTERS AND SCRIBES: RETHINKING OLD MON

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A re-examination of 11th/12th c. Mon ink glosses at Pagán temples challenges established reconstructions of post-Dvāravatī phonology.

Out of 2 834 registered monuments in the greater Pagán area 123 temples are decorated with illustrated panels, painted over dried mud plaster. These types of murals depict scenes of the life of the historical Buddha and his previous existences, and other motives such as the »28 Buddhas« or other divinities. In 77 temples descriptive and explanatory captions in Mon, Pāli, or Burmese have been added in ink below each wall panel.

Ink captions written in Mon appear in 13 monuments; a close examination of these texts, dating from the reigns of Saw Lu (1038–1084) by way of Kyanzittha (1040–1112) to Alaungsithu (c. 1090–1167), and ranging in extent from identificatory glosses of just three words to micro-narratives of 50+ words, reveals significant and systematic variation which has failed to attract the attention of scholars and which suggests the existence of several distinct Old Mon dialects at Pagán, or, at the very least, a number of different schools of scribes.

While lexical variation in the usage of personal pronouns had been noted by Shorto and ascribed to difference in style, orthographic variation in these glosses has either not been entered at all in the *Dictionary of the Mon Inscriptions* (1971) [DMI] or not been identified with a particular source, thus concealing the systematic character of variation in this type of text. Glosses in six temples had not been excerpted for DMI.

I provide a detailed analysis of orthographic, lexical and syntactic variation of the ink captions, on the basis of which I distinguish a number of dialects or, alternatively, distinct schools of scribal practice prevalent at Pagán in the 11th and 12th centuries.

The evidence to be presented calls into question the relative and absolute chronology of some sound changes within the Old Mon period down to the 13th c., the deployment of a “simplified orthography”, and the existence of the variety “classical Old Mon” altogether — all these assumptions propounded explicitly or implied in DMI.

The evidence rather suggests, among others, a possible Thaton dialect intrusion in Pagán, or exclave, co-extensive with other varieties there.

Instances to be discussed include (1) *-in* ~ *-en* variations as well as (2) *-eun* ~ *-un* (\neq */-wŋ/), (3) pre-Lamphun *-r-* metathesis, (4) disjunctive spellings of disyllables as space-saving devices (thus spelling conventions being, in part, governed by physical constraints).

The problems exposed here also relate to methodological matters in historical-comparative linguistics when adducing evidence from medieval texts, such as the reliability of transcriptions, editorial and transcriptional history (‘meta-versioning’) and conservation issues.

Reconstructions ought to rely on concrete textual evidence and not on dictionary entries.

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