

THE ORIGIN OF CURSIVE WRITING (DBU MED) IN TIBET

Sam van Schaik

There are several theories on the origin of Tibet's cursive script, known as dbu med or 'headless' in contrast to the dbu can or 'headed' script. Traditional histories state that dbu can and dbu med were derived from different Indian scripts in the seventh century. Another theory is that dbu med developed as a cursive form of dbu can. These theories have never been put to the test based on a thorough review of the earliest epigraphic and manuscript material. In this paper I will present the evidence and show how it strongly indicates that dbu med developed from dbu can, not from a separate Indian model. Firstly I will look at similar work that has been done in the paleographical study of Roman writing: the distinction between formal and cursive scripts; the idea of 'ductus' as a description of the stroke order of each letter; the 'principles of ease' that govern the development of a cursive script; and the social contexts that determine which script is used. Secondly I will present the evidence from eighth to ninth-century Tibetan inscriptions and manuscripts. I will argue that the dbu can script of the royal inscriptions is the earliest form of Tibetan writing available to us. Taking a few sample letters, I will show how 'principles of ease' can be used to explain the transformation of this dbu can script into the dbu med script. Thirdly I will show how the different scripts were used in particular social contexts.