

Litteral evidence of the vanishing Old English [ȝ] in Middle English

Old English had two surface velar fricatives, voiced [ȝ] and voiceless [x] (both allophones of /g/, as discussed in Hogg et al 1992), which weakened in different ways during the development of English. While [x] survives in some varieties of Modern English, [ȝ] vanished in all varieties during the Middle English period, first becoming [w] in the 13th century, before merging with the preceding vowel. Written as <g> in Old English, it was gradually replaced by digraphs like <ou> and then by <w>, which remains in Modern English: e.g., Old English *būgan* > Middle English *bōuen* or *bōwen* > Modern English *bow* (verb).

This paper explores the *Litteral Substitution Set* (Laing & Lass 2009) for reflexes of OE [ȝ] in the Middle English corpus of the *Surtees Psalter* (considering versions in six manuscripts from the 13th and 4th centuries). I focus on the links between the *littera 'y'* and [ȝ], on lenition in the context of back vowels ([ȝ] > [w]), on palatalization in the context of front vowels ([ȝ] > [j]), and on the creation of new diphthongs in Middle English. I also examine the different uses of the *figurae* <y> and <ȝ> for reflexes of OE [ȝ] and the use of <yh> and <ȝh> as potential digraphs.

The *Surtees Psalter* shows multiple spelling variants for OE [ȝ]: e.g. Middle English *bōuen* or *bōwen* are spelt *boye*, *boye*, *bogh*, *bojhe*, *bojhe*, and *begh*. I argue that the <gh> spellings are hangovers of the Old English scribal habits of using <g> for [ȝ], and that the systematic use of the *littera 'y'* across the six versions suggests that [ȝ] had not yet fully vanished. This shows that the *Surtees Psalter* scribes had developed a graphic system which represents this ongoing phonological change between the disappearance of the velar fricative and the creation of new diphthongs.

References:

Hogg, Richard M., et al., editors. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Laing, Margaret, and Roger Lass. 'Shape-Shifting, Sound-Change and the Genesis of Prodigal Writing Systems'. *English Language and Linguistics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674308002840>.

The *Surtees Psalter* manuscripts references:

London: British Library, MS. Cotton Vespasian D.7

London: British Library, MS. Egerton 614

London: British Library, MS. Harley 1770

Cambridge: Corpus Christi College, MS 278

Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 921

Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 425