

# STANDARD OLD ENGLISH: SCRIBAL PRACTICES IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

Old English, the language of southern mainland Britain from the fifth century to the eleventh, is the best recorded European vernacular before the high Middle Ages. The significance of this early manifestation of a written vernacular has long been recognised. Grammars of Old English still present the language of King Alfred as the norm from which all other “dialects” may be seen to deviate. This is principally because a thorough investigation of the later Old English standard has yet to be made. This article will show how ways in which spelling variation in eleventh-century manuscripts may be related to the range and diversity of scribes, to determine what, precisely, the outer reaches of the employment of the late Old English written standard were, and how consistently it was adhered to.

KEY WORDS: Standard Old English, dialect, spelling variation, vernacular.

## RESUMEN

El inglés antiguo, lengua del sur de la Gran Bretaña desde el siglo V hasta el XI, es la lengua vernácula mejor documentada antes de la plena Edad Media. La importancia de esta manifestación temprana de la escritura vernácula hace tiempo que ha sido reconocida. Las gramáticas del inglés antiguo todavía presentan la lengua del rey Alfredo como la norma desde la cual los demás “dialectos” pueden haber surgido. Es por ello por lo que está aún por llevarse a cabo una investigación profunda del estándar del inglés antiguo. Este artículo mostrará las formas en que la variación escrita de los manuscritos del siglo XI se relaciona con la diversidad de los escribas, para determinar lo que pudo haber sido el empleo del estándar escrito del inglés antiguo y el grado de consistencia con que se aplicó.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inglés antiguo estándar, dialecto, variación escrita, lengua vernácula.

The concept of a standard written variety of English in use at the end of the tenth century and during the eleventh is widely accepted by scholars. In Sisam’s words:

the early eleventh century was the period in which West Saxon was recognised all over England as the official and literary language. The York surveys of about 1030

supply a good instance in local documents from the North. The prayers to St. Dunstan and St. Ælfheah in MS. Arundel 155 give an equally striking example from Kent, for though they were certainly copied at Christ Church, Canterbury, into an English service-book, and were presumably composed and Englished at Canterbury, yet they are normal West Saxon. Dialect does break through, the more frequently as the eleventh century advances; but good West Saxon may be written anywhere in its first half.<sup>1</sup>

Sisam doesn't make clear what aspect or aspects of language he is talking about in relation to standardisation, but the context shows clearly that he is thinking about spelling. Yet in almost a century since he wrote there has been no advance in our understanding of spelling in the late Old English period. Now, thanks to a large grant from the Arts and Humanities Board of Great Britain, the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies has embarked on a thorough investigation of spelling variation in the late Old English period. This essay explains in part what we are aiming to do.

It is necessary to examine two things in any attempt to test the view that Sisam expresses: first, what is meant by "good West Saxon," and second, where does "dialect" break through, and in what form. It would seem axiomatic that the language of Ælfric is "good West Saxon," partly because he himself must have composed in that written dialect, partly because many of the earliest manuscripts of his works were clearly written by scribes working in the heartland of Wessex. The earliest manuscript of the First Series of the *Catholic Homilies*, for example, London, British Library, Royal 7. C. XII, has some annotations in Ælfric's own hand,<sup>2</sup> showing that the manuscript was in Cerne Abbas where Ælfric wrote and that he himself looked over its text. This is the manuscript that Peter Clemoes used as his base text for his edition. For ways in which, in Sisam's words, dialect breaks through, we may look at the many copies of the same material that exist from a variety of eleventh-century dates. This would be an easy task if editors of Old English printed all spelling variations, but Clemoes, in company with most editors (especially those whose work is published by the Early English Text Society), limits the amount of information that he gives on readings of manuscripts other than his base. In his "Editorial Procedure," he is quite explicit: "Spelling variations, including variations in the forms of the personal pronouns, are excluded."<sup>3</sup> The extent of that exclusion of potentially useful linguistic information may be shown by the following list of

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<sup>1</sup> "MSS. Bodley 340 and 342: Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*," first published in *The Review of English Studies* 7 (1931): 7-22, 8 (1932): 51-68, and 9 (1933): 1-12. I quote from the reprint in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953) 148-98, at 153 (hereafter *Studies*).

<sup>2</sup> See *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series. Text*, ed. Peter Clemoes, EETS ss 17 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Clemoes 169.

forms culled from just one homily, I.iv, for the Assumption of John the Apostle. In the left-hand column are the “standard” forms in the Royal manuscript, dating from *ca.* 990. In the right-hand column are forms from Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 198, copied in the middle of the first half of the eleventh century, and so some three or four decades later. The line numbers are to Clemoes’ edition. I have excluded variations in the vowels of inflections.<sup>4</sup>

ITEM NO.	LINE NO.	ROYAL 7 C. XII	CCCC 198
1.	4	myrðe <sup>5</sup>	myrchðe
2.	5, 182	miclum	micclum <sup>6</sup>
3.	10	ateorode	ateorad
4.	11	ðenincmenn	ðeningmæn
5.	13	menniscnysse	mænniscnysse
6.	16	witodlice	witotlice
7.	18	rodehengene	rodehæncgene
8.	27	asende	asænde
9.	28	scearpnysse	scerpnysse
10.	29	gelufedan	gelefedan
11.	31	ylcan	ilcan
12.	35	asend	asænd
13.	36	fægniende	fæniende
14.	41	dreorie	driorige
15.	45	gewende	gewænde
16.	48	deorwurðum	diorwurðum
17.	53	seo	sio
18.	53	hremde	hrymde

<sup>4</sup> The list of variant spellings in CCCC 198 draws on a text file prepared by Joanna Clatworthy as part of her doctoral work in conjunction with the Manchester project, and on a collation prepared by the database technician employed by the project, Dan Smith. We have all also drawn, thanks to the generosity of the trustees of Peter Clemoes’ estate, on his collation of manuscripts prepared for his edition. I am grateful for the ability to use all of this work, but stress that responsibility for the accuracy of information presented here is mine and mine alone.

<sup>5</sup> I use *ð* throughout to represent both thorn and eth since the difference between them is palaeographic rather than orthographic.

<sup>6</sup> I haven’t noted the number of instances where CCCC 198 agrees with the Royal manuscript, although it is considerable, because here the scribe may be influenced by his copy-text. I assume that it is the instances where the scribe (or a predecessor) has changed his copy-text that are important.



19.	54	ðone	ðane
20.	56	genyðerod	geniðerod
21.	56	ydel	idel
22.	56	læcedom	læcadom
23.	63	gefeg	gefeig
24.	68	deorwurðan	diorworðan
25.	68	engla	ængla
26.	69	men	mænn
27.	72	feol	feoll
28.	78	heora	hiora
29.	83	deoflican	dioflican
30.	90	deorwyrðum	deorworðum
31.	90	gymmum	gimmum
32.	94	secgað	sæcgað
33.	96	bicgað	biggað
34.	96	forluron	forluran
35.	97	pællene	pellene
36.	98	forweornian	forweornnion
37.	99	hwilwendlice	hwilwændlice
38.	102	gelyfan	gelefan
39.	106	earmingas	erminges
40.	112	forgyfenes	forgeofennys
41.	115	brihð	bryhcð
42.	117	witodlice	wittodlice
43.	132, 135, 158	astrehte	astreahte
44.	145	miswende	miswænde
45.	147	awyrgedan	awyrigedan
46.	147	sceoccan	scuccan
47.	149	afyllede	afillede
48.	151	unasecgendlicum	unasecgandlicum
49.	152	stencum	stæncum
50.	167	micle	miccle
51.	168	gitsiendum	gitsigendum
52.	174	gebigde	gebygde
53.	186	englisc	ænglisc
54.	195	hæðengyldum	æðengyldum
55.	197	endemes	ændemes
56.	207	meniu	mæniu

57.	209	gebigede	gebygede
58.	219	getengde	getængde
59.	222	drence	drynce
60.	249	æfter	efter
61.	249	gewende	gewænde
62.	252	oð	ot
63.	259	gestrynde	gestrinde
64.	267	lifiendan	lifigendan
65.	269	menigfealdra	mænigfealdra
66.	270	worulde	weoruld
67.	279	byrgene	byrgenne
68.	280	ðysne	ðisne
69.	281	fela	feala
70.	281	frecednyssum	fræcednyssum

None of these CCCC 198 variants is cited by Clemoes except the last, which he included presumably because it occurs in four manuscripts. In general, it may be said that an editor may be justified in omitting very frequent variation, although until all the evidence is in, it has to be said that it may be impossible to be sure which are significant variants and which are not. Here, in just one homily in what is a very large homiliary, we have evidence that a scribe —not necessarily the scribe of CCCC 198 but perhaps his predecessor— has made a very large number of minor alterations to the copy-text, and if we add up all the evidence from even this one manuscript, it might tell us much about that manuscript's origin or about the training of its scribes. Even more, if we assemble the evidence of many similar manuscripts, the accumulated evidence may well prove very significant indeed. That is what the Manchester project seeks to discover.

Meantime, let us examine what even the limited evidence of this one homily could reveal to a linguistic investigator if it had been included in Clemoes' apparatus. First, we may accept that there would be no value in an editor listing *i/y* variation as in No. 11 above, or that of unstressed vowels as in No. 3, since all the evidence that we have —and it is already considerable— points to the first of these having no more than very minor graphological interest by this date, and the second being a further manifestation of the levelling of vowels in inflections. Similarly, it would seem that it is hardly worthwhile listing examples of doubling or simplification of consonants, such as that in *micclum* (No. 2), *forweornnion* (No. 36) or *wittodlice* (No. 42), unusual though the last two may be. Even so, such doubling, if all the examples from the eleventh century were collected, might be interesting if, for example, they occurred only after etymologically short vowels. Other features are so commonly found in late Old English that they are unlikely to be significant, for example the falling together of *wor*, *wyr* and *weor* (Nos. 30 and 66), the representation of palatal *g* (cf. Nos. 13, 14 and 23), the alternation of *eo* and *u* after *sc*



(No. 46), *e* for *ea* before *r* followed by another consonant (Nos. 9 and 39), and the “correction” by a copyist (if that is what it is) of so-called late West Saxon smoothing (No. 43).

In the case of an editor dealing with an item with the complicated textual history of *CH* I.iv, with ten surviving manuscript copies, it is hardly surprising to find that he concentrates on textual variants to the exclusion of spelling ones with no apparent significance. However, in the process, some valuable information is also lost sight of. If the above features are relatively insignificant, it would surely have been a great deal more useful, from both the graphological and possibly the phonological point of view, to have allowed the reader to see Nos. 1 and 41 (*ch* or *hc* written for *h*) since we don't yet know what the overall pattern of these spellings is in the eleventh century.<sup>7</sup> We certainly do know that it would have been worth listing No. 54, the omission of initial *h*.<sup>8</sup> CCCC 198 was at Worcester by the thirteenth century, as the annotations by the tremulous hand show,<sup>9</sup> but the textual tradition that it draws upon, for its earliest items at least, is closely linked to Kent.<sup>10</sup> The variants listed here have a number of features that might be considered Kentish (note the *y* / *e* confusion in Nos. 18, 38 and 59, and the replacement of *æ* by *e* in No. 58, and the many instances of *io* for *eo*, e.g. No. 14). The scribe evidently prefers *æ* to *e* before *n*, and although the significance of this is disputed, it may again be a sign of Kentish copying.

More significant again is the form *feala* (No. 69) because it is much rarer, and may be a Kentish spelling, one which, as I said some years ago, warrants further investigation.<sup>11</sup> It may also be asked if the examples in Nos. 6 and 62 give rare examples of unvoicing, or if they are simply graphological.

CCCC 198 is a complex manuscript, with seven or eight scribes having worked on its early eleventh-century part, some in tandem, and with further additions made half a century later.<sup>12</sup> The I.iv homily considered here was copied by Ker's Scribe 1,<sup>13</sup> and the same scribe copied two items before this and part of the one following. It would be more than interesting to see how many of the linguistic

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<sup>7</sup> Sievers-BRUNNER cite *ch* for *h* in “seht späte Texte” but make no mention of *hc*, see Karl Brunner, *Altenglische Grammatik nach der angelsächsischen Grammatik von Eduard Sievers*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen, 1965), §221, Amn. 1. Clearly the subject warrants much fuller investigation, especially since this text in CCCC 198 can hardly be called “very late”.

<sup>8</sup> See my “Initial *H* in Old English,” *Anglia* 88 (1970): 165-96.

<sup>9</sup> See N.R. KER, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> See Sisam, *Studies* 148-98.

<sup>11</sup> Introduction to my *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, EETS os 300 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) I.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed description, see my “The Homilies of the Blickling Manuscript,” *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 299-316, at 309-15.

<sup>13</sup> KER, *Catalogue*, 76-82.

features highlighted here occur again in the rest of the scribe's work, and if they occur in the work of his contemporaries, some of whom were surely working in the same scriptorium, quite apart from the wider consideration of how often and where such spellings (particularly the more unusual ones such as *ch* / *hc* for *h*) occur elsewhere in the early eleventh century. A quick trawl of Scribe 1's first item has revealed examples of loss of initial *h*, confusion of *æ* and *e* before *n*, and the perhaps Kentish *e* for *y*. There may be more in his other work. It would be surprising if this manuscript were to be considered representative of ones in which Sisam's "dialect" shows through "as the eleventh century advances," since it is written so early in the century, but if such changes do appear this early, then we perhaps need to rewrite the history of the language and reconsider the extent to which Standard Old English was used.

The examples drawn from CCC 198 detailed above have stressed that the difficulty of studying spelling in the late Old English period is compounded by the fact that the notion of a standardised language is so widely accepted that few question it without having the evidence to understand fully its form and its potential varieties, and most editors exclude what are seen as variations within it from the apparatus to their editions. In presenting the text of the First Series of the *Catholic Homilies* Peter Clemoes had enough to do to work out different recensions of the text. I am myself guilty of the practice, for, by and large, I cite only substantive variants in my edition of *The Vercelli Homilies*, in line with the editorial practice of the Early English Text Society. But I hope enough has been said here to show that this editorial practice is wrong, and needs to be changed, even if only by presenting spelling variants in a different part of the apparatus. Editors must have a full collation in order to do the editing properly, and although they may not have space either in their introduction or indeed in their minds to attempt a linguistic analysis of every manuscript, at least they should give others the opportunity to do that work by giving them the evidence that they have collected.

This essay has been exemplary and exploratory. Until the language of CCC 198 is examined in more detail—and the evidence from the whole of the book considered—conclusions are impossible to draw. And until the evidence of this book with its many scribes can be set against that of very many others written in all parts of the eleventh century, we cannot say with any degree of certainty where and in what degree "dialect" breaks through as the century advances. Sisam, with all his great experience of the reading of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, may well be right, but we need the hard evidence to prove it.



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