

FROM DOMESDAY BOOK TO LAY SUBSIDY ROLLS:
PLACE-NAMES AS INFORMANTS OF LINGUISTIC
CHANGE.

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English place-names have frequently been used in recent decades by researchers in different historical fields. In the case of the study of linguistic evolution, the publication in 1913 of Eilert Ekwall's innovative article "Die Ortsnamenforschung ein Hilfsmittel für das Studium der englischen Sprachgeschichte" opened up a new branch of investigation that has been especially fruitful. However, the differing interpretations of this type of evidence for the reconstruction of Old and Middle English dialects that have been proposed since the publication of the above mentioned article provide a clear illustration of the problematical nature of this material.

In spite of this, it is clear that the onomastic evidence must not be categorically excluded from the materials used by the linguist engaged in the painstaking task of reconstructing the linguistic features of Old and Middle English. Given the unreliability of other types of evidence (such as literary records), place-names should be regarded as the most reliable source available to us of the phonemic reality of previous periods in the history of the language; furthermore, Old and Middle English phonemes reconstructed through the study of onomastic material tend to show regular patterns of geographical spread, while the diffusion of the written forms recorded by the scribes in their copies of literary texts is usually subject to social and cultural processes.¹

Taking J. Fisiak's (1984, 1985, 1990) and G. Kristensson's (1967, 1986) previous works on *Domesday Book* (1086) (hereinafter: *DB*) and thirteenth and fourteenth century *Lay Subsidy Rolls* (hereinafter *LSR*) as my model, I am proposing a diachronic approach to the onomastic material recorded in these documents, which accounts for some of the numerous phonological changes experienced by the Eng-

¹ For a preliminary study of the interaction between phonemic evolution and scribal practice in early Middle English see Díaz (1994, 2: 458-505).

lish language in the period immediately after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Both documents have proven extremely useful for the historical dialectologist in recent times and, in spite of the methodological differences in the treatment of the place-names recorded in each one of them, I would like to focus on their complementary character as informants of processes of linguistic change in early Middle English.

In this paper, I am going to focus on the phonetic process traditionally known as *second fronting* and its significance for the study of the early Middle English dialect of the South West Midlands. According to classical accounts on this change, the palatalization of West Germanic *a* into OE *æ* and its later development into *e* took place in the dialects spoken in the Mercian dialects of the West Midland area and in Kentish. However, the quality of this sound, which is usually represented by the grapheme <e> in the *Vespasian Psalter* and other Mercian texts, was slightly different from the one derived from Germanic *e*, as can be seen from the subsequent levelling of West-Saxon *æ* and Mercian *e* (from West Germanic *a*) during the twelfth century (Campbell 1959: 62-64).

Early Middle English texts produced in the South-West Midlands in the years immediately after the beginning of the thirteenth century show a great deal of inconsistency in their use of the spellings <æ>, <a> (both for West-Saxon *æ*) and <e> (rendering Mercian *e*) in this group of words. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Díaz 1994: 450 and Appendix B), the distribution of the three spellings corresponds to the following patterns:

(a) Copies of West-Saxon documentary and literary texts produced in the South-West Midlands between 1200 and 1300 show high degrees of retention of <æ>. Scribes systematically use <e> only when dealing with copies of Old Mercian texts (such as *St Chad*), or when consciously holding on to the orthographic tradition of their own region, as in the case of the famous “Worcester tremulous hand” of the early thirteenth century (Franzen 1991).

(b) However, contemporary copies of literary texts produced in this same region show a prevalence of the grapheme <e>, being the copyist of the *Caligula* manuscript of *Lazamon* the only one who alternates this spelling with <æ>; further, the double graph <eo> is sporadically found in the group of texts copied in the AB-language.²

(c) The use of <a> is exclusive to the manuscripts copied by the end of the thirteenth century, and is especially frequent in translations of West-Saxon charters into Middle English.

It is thus clear that literary and documentary records cannot account for the geographical distribution of the OE phonemes /æ/ and /e/ and their evolution in early Middle English. How can the onomastic material recorded in *DB* and other medieval tax-rolls help us to elucidate the phonemic reality of the dialects of late Old and early Middle English spoken in the South-West Midlands?

In order to answer this question, I have analysed a total of 246 place-names and related onomastic material as they appear in *DB* and the *LSR* to Herefordshire (1292, 1294 and 1334), Worcestershire (1272, 1327 and 1332) and the Northern

² For a complete description of this orthographic variant of early Middle English see d’Ardenne (1961: 1-54).

half of Gloucestershire (1312 and 1327). The West-Saxon forms of the words from which this place-names derive are these: *Æcci*, **Ægel*, *æppel*, *ærn*, *æsc*, *ædele*, **Bæcci*, *bæce*, *bæcere*, **Bæcga*, **Bæddi*, *cærse*, *dæg*, **Dægel*, *dæl*, **dræg*, *fæder*, *fæger*, *fæsten*, *glæd*, *glæs*, *gnætt*, *græfere*, *hæc(c)*, *hæsel*, *hræfn*, *mægden*, **Mædelgār*, *nægel*, **plæsc*, *prætt*, *scræf*, *slæd*, *smæl*, *stæpe*, *tægl*, **Tæppa*, **þæccan*, *wægn*, *wæps*, **wæsse* and *wæter*.

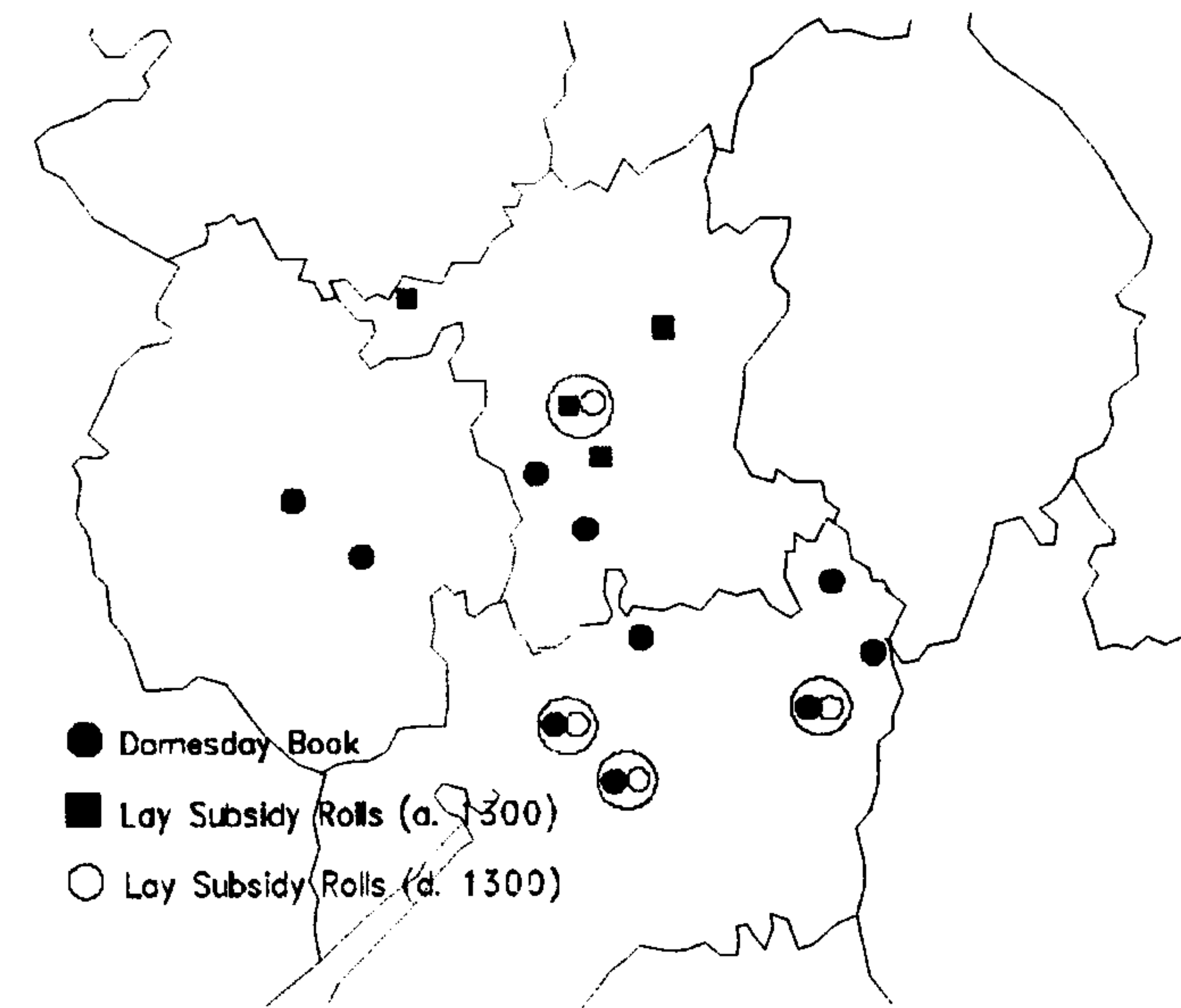


Figure 1: Occurrences of <e> for West Saxon *æ*.

As can be seen from Fig. 1 above, the spelling <e> is widely found throughout the region of the South West Midlands in all the documents studied for this research. However, the predominance of <e> over <a> is a phenomenon exclusively attested in *DB*, <a> being the most frequently used in all the *LSR* analysed. Our results can be summarized as follows³:

	Gloucestershire			Herefordshire			Worcestershire			TOTAL		
	DB	LSR ₁	LSR ₂	DB	LSR ₁	LSR ₂	DB	LSR ₁	LSR ₂	DB	LSR ₁	LSR ₂
<a>	4	–	95	1	1	–	3	14	99	8	15	194
<e>	7	–	8	2	–	–	2	5	5	11	5	13

TABLE 1: Total number of occurrences of the spellings <a> and <e> in place-names recorded in documents related to the three counties of the South West Midlands.

In spite of the rather high proportion of spellings using <a> recorded of *DB*, it is clear that second fronting affected the whole region included in our study. As regards place-names, occurrences of <e> are especially frequent in the onomas-

³ Where LSR₁ and LSR₂ refer to *LSR* compiled, respectively, before and after the year 1300. No division between place-names and personal names derived from them has been made here.

tic material corresponding to the Northern half of Gloucestershire and Eastern Herefordshire (see Fig. 1). The nine forms recorded for these two counties in *DB* are to be derived from the following Anglian roots: **Egel*, *ern*, *esc* (x2), **Becci*, *bece*, **Becga* and *edele* (x2). Meanwhile <a> forms have been found for **Ægel*, *cærse*, *hæsel*, **Mædelgār* and *slæd*, mainly corresponding to localities in Central and North-Eastern Gloucestershire. Only in the case of **Ægel* (corresponding to AYLWORTH, PNGI i.199), fluctuation between <e> and <a> has been detected (namely in the forms *DB Ailwrde* and *DB Elewerde*). It is thus clear that the phoneme /e/ from West Germanic *a* was in use in both counties by the end of the Old English period.

The evidence reflected in the *a* previously cited show a much clearer picture of the dialectal situation for Gloucestershire, our data for Herefordshire being too small to be considered. Place-names recorded in both counties show a progressive disappearance of <e> spellings, which contrasts with an almost generalized use of <a>. Spellings in <e> correspond to the Anglian roots **Egel* (x2), *ern* (x2), *bece* and **Becga*, all of them being fossilized forms of names previously recorded in *DB* (namely AYLWORTH, BRAUN, BADGEWORTH and BAGE). The advance of the phoneme /a/ by the end of the thirteenth century is attested to by the 96 different forms in <a> (most of them recorded in Gloucestershire), in clear contrast with the 8 cases of <e> (i.e. the 6 place-names previously referred to, plus the personal names *le Thechare* and *le Thecchar*, derived from Anglian *þeccan* and recorded in the *LSR* to Gloucestershire of 1327).

Much more puzzling is the evidence recorded from the county of Worcestershire, the quantity and variety of the forms found allowing a deeper and more complete analysis of the linguistic changes that affected this region throughout the period of our study. As can be seen from Table 1, Worcestershire is the only South-West-Midland county where spellings in <a> predominate over <e> as early as 1086 (date of compilation of *DB*).

The grapheme <a> is found in the forms *Fikkenappeltreu* (from OE *æppel*), *Asseberwe* (from OE *æsc*) and *Wasseborne* (from OE **wæsse*), corresponding to localities in Central and Northern Worcestershire (i.e. FICKENAPPLETREE PNWo 305, ASHBOROUGH PNWo 337 and LITTLE WASHBOURNE PNWo 176).

As for /e/, this phoneme is found only in the forms *Holefest* (from Anglian *festen*) and *Bradewesham* (from Anglian **wesse*), which refers to the localities of HOLDFAST HALL (PNWo 140) and BROADWAS (PNWo 176), in the southwestern quarter of the county (see Fig. 1). The ten occurrences of <e> extracted from the *LSR* for Worcestershire correspond to names derived from eight different Anglian roots: *eppel*, *esc*, *festen*, *grefere*, *hecc*, *hrefn* and *scref*. Three of these forms are found exclusively in personal names: *grefere* (SR *Le Grever* 1327), *hecc* (SR *Intheheche* 1327 x2) and *scræf* (SR *Schreweley* 1275). Given the lower degree of reliability of this sort of names as dialectal informants (Arngart 1949: 17-29), these forms are not going to be dealt with in the discussion below on the relation between these spellings and second fronting.

The analogy between OE *æppel* and Old Norse *epli* might account for the <e>

spelling in SR *Eppelton* 1275 (for NAPLETON PNWo 146). However, the scarcity of Scandinavian place-names in this county (Sundby 1963: 242-250) and the absence of other forms using <e> for onomastic material derived from this root in the most Scandinavized regions of England (Kristensson 1967: 42-43 and 1987: 35-36) lead us to account for the existence of an Anglian form *eppel* for this name.

As for OE *æsc*, recorded in SR *Esseberuwe* 1275 (for ASHBOROUGH PNWo 337), forms using <e> have also been recorded in regions not affected by second fronting. According to Kristensson (1987: 49), the phoneme /ʃ/ is responsible for the change from /æ/ to /e/ in early Old English, which also accounts for the generalized use of <e> in *DB* for place-names derived from this word.

In the case of OE *fæsten*, the <e> spelling in SR *Holefeld* 1275 (corresponding to HOLDFAST HALL PNWo 140) can be explained as a scribal mistake: given the similarity between OE *fæst-* and *feld*, the copyist would have miswritten the second element of the compound in his manuscript. However, it should be remembered that other forms using <e> have been recorded for this place-name in *DB* (see above) and in other medieval documents from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Sundby 1963: 40), the later use of <a> in SR *Holefaste* 1327 presupposing an opening of Anglian *e* (from West Germanic *a*) in the root *festen* (with second fronting).

The root OE *hræfn* appears with <e> in the different forms recorded for the locality of RAVENSHILL (PNWo 171): SR *Refenshull* 1275 and SR *Reveshull* 1327. It has been argued (Campbell 1959: 74-75) that the /e/ in this OE word was originated by i-umlaut in the primitive Old English form **hrævni-*.

Clear evidence of the existence of a phoneme /e/ from West Germanic *a* in the late Old English dialects of the South West Midlands is thus scarce. However, the later generalization of <a> in all the place-names presented above (as reflected by their modern spellings) points to the maintenance of *e* from West Germanic *a* until the end of the thirteenth century.

As a result of this brief analysis, the following succession of phonetic changes can be distinguished in the late Old and early Middle English dialect of the South West Midlands:

- (1) West Germanic *a* became *e* in all the Old Mercian dialects spoken in this part of the Midlands, and this phoneme remained different from OE *e*.
- (2) By the beginning of the eleventh century Mercian *e* was depalatalized and soon retracted to *a*; evidence of this depalatalization is earlier and more numerous in the onomastic material recorded in the part of Worcestershire situated between the Severn and the Avon than in the rest of the region.
- (3) Meanwhile, Mercian *e* was maintained until the middle of the twelfth century in Herefordshire, Northern Gloucestershire and the South-Eastern corner of Worcestershire (see Fig. 1).
- (4) By the end of the thirteenth century retracted *a* was generalized in the whole region, although isolated occurrences of <e> are still found in Northern Gloucestershire.

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