The A and O of a medieval English sound-change

To the best of my knowledge, no detailed comprehensive investigation of the origins and geographical diffusion of ā > ō (as in stān > stōn), one of the most important phonological changes in the history of the English language, has so far been undertaken. The accounts in the standard handbooks usually look back to the classic treatments in Luick ([1964]) or Jordan (1974) and are rarely based on any new empirical research. The present paper will first briefly discuss some problems concerning the sources and phonetic quality of OE ā (touching on Homorganic and Open Syllable Lengthening inter alia), vowel length in compounds, the actuation of the change and certain instances of o erroneously interpreted as ō. This will be followed by a critical evaluation of the (partly unpublished) evidence provided by onomastic material – chiefly culled from the county surveys of the English Place-Name Society – as well as literary texts, glosses and documents, ranging from late Old English to early Middle English. The numerous examples of early o-spellings now confirm the intuitions of those scholars who advocated an eleventh-century date for ā > ō. In the North and North Midlands, however, the change seems to have taken place not as late as hitherto assumed (cf. e.g. Dietz 1989), even though matters are somewhat obscured by the development of ou > au (more widespread than generally believed). Finally, summary statistics (based on place-name data) permit some unexpected, albeit tentative, conclusions about the frequency and geographical spread of o-spellings throughout England prior to 1290-1350, the period studied by Kristensson (1967, 1987, 1995).

References


