

ON THE ORIGIN OF *SIKE* 'SUCH':
A REVISION IN THE LIGHT OF *LAEME* AND *LALME*¹

Abstract

This paper endeavours to provide a revision of the origin of *sike* 'such' in the light of medieval linguistic atlases such as *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* and *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. It has been a matter of a certain controversy for scholars to decide whether this regional variant distinguished by a voiceless velar plosive represents a Scandinavian loan, or shows Norse phonological influence. In this vein, it is our purpose to cast light upon the ascendancy of *sike* by means of a descriptive and contrastive assessment of the Middle English linguistic material collected in the aforementioned works.

Keywords: Middle English, Old Norse, English dialectology, *LAEME*, *LALME*.

Resumen

Esta nota trata de ofrecer una revisión del origen de *sike* 'such' a la luz de los datos proporcionados por atlas lingüísticos medievales como *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* y *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. No ha existido un consenso claro acerca de si esta variante regional caracterizada por una oclusiva velar sorda debe interpretarse como un préstamo escandinavo o, por el contrario, como el resultado del influjo fonológico nórdico de sustrato. En este sentido, nos proponemos arrojar luz sobre la ascendencia de *sike* por medio de un análisis descriptivo y comparativo del material lingüístico ofrecido por los atlas mencionados.

Palabras clave: inglés medio, antiguo nórdico, dialectología inglesa, *LAEME*, *LALME*.

It has been a commonplace and a linguistic truism that *sike* represents an unpalatalised variant of Old English (OE) *swilc*, *swylc*.² However, it has been rather complex to ascertain whether the emergence of the voiceless velar stop in words such as *sike* or *kirk* 'church' is due to Scandinavian substratum influence or points to an Old Norse (ON) loan. In fact, Björkmann (1900: 13 n.2) claims that "it is often very difficult to decide what is to be called a loan-word and what is only a native word influenced by Scandinavian." Likewise, Wakelin (1991: 131) avers that

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of these pages for their constructive comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this note. Needless to say, any shortcomings are mine alone.

² It must be acknowledged that other spellings appeared alongside *sike*: *syke*, *sik*, *sic*, etc. In view of this variety of forms, *sike* has been taken to refer to the unpalatalised variant under discussion.

“Although it is often difficult to decide whether an ON word was simply borrowed or whether its English cognate was influenced by it, such forms [...] in the northern dialects are obviously the result of ON influence of some kind”. Jordan (1974: 166–167) also explains these unpalatalised variants on account of ON influence; he proposes a twofold justification: “The ⟨k⟩ forms may rest upon Scandinavian influence, i.e. displacement by the Scandinavian word [...] yet we may reckon with sound substitution in the speech of the Scandinavian settlers which transferred to English pronunciation”. Other scholars such as Brunner (1970: 23, 41) or Strang (1970: 315) hold that the velar plosive emerged by ON phonological influence or, in Brunner’s (1970: 41) words, because of “partial assimilation of English words to Norse phonology.” Conversely, Burnley (1992: 421), for example, backs the contention that /k/ responds to borrowing, for “the adoption of Scandinavian words resulted in doublets, some of which have survived [...] *kirk* / *church*, [...]”.³ It has also been argued that the velar stop of *sike* descends from the OE dative singular *swilcum*, *swylcum*, whilst the southern palatalised consonant stems from other cases, namely the nominative singular *swilc*, *swylc* (Macafee 1997: 203).

In view of this linguistic uncertainty, this analysis endeavours to shed light upon the origin of *sike*. As it will be shown, a closer evaluation of the available Middle English (ME) data suggests that this trait may have been reinforced by the ON cognate *sliker* which, in turn, originated ME *slike* ‘such’ that was distributed in certain northern and eastern areas.

As is well known, a great deal of forms arose from OE *swilc*, *swylc* that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*), fall into different strands on account of the quality of the vowel,⁴ the retention or loss of /w/, the preservation or loss of /l/, and the palatalisation or non-palatalisation of OE /k/. Side by side with those variants which gave way to present-day standard English *such*, there is ME evidence that testifies clearly to the existence of unpalatalised forms in northern and eastern counties. By way of illustration, *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (henceforth *LAEME*) records several instances of /k/-variants either with

³ See further Brook (1965: 83–84), Wakelin (1972: 74), Samuels (1989: 109) or Horobin and Smith (2002: 73), among others.

⁴ Needless to say, the *OED* refers to the development of OE /y/ into /i/, /e/ or /u/ in ME dialects. It goes without saying that our attention will be focused on ⟨i⟩-forms.

or without retention of /w/ and / or /l/.⁵ Firstly, *swilk(e)* is documented in texts # 150 (+ *swilc*), # 151, # 155 (+ *swilc* × 19, *suwilc*), # 282 (+ *suwilk*), # 285 (× 6) (+ *svich*), # 297 (× 6) and # 1400 (× 3) (+ *suilc*, *swilc*).⁶ Whilst evidence from texts # 151 and # 297 reveals the distribution of /k/ in East Lancashire and the East Riding of Yorkshire, respectively, the examples extracted from the other documents indicate that the unpalatalised consonant was also present in West Norfolk —# 150, # 155, # 285, # 1400— and the Isle of Ely (# 282).⁷ Secondly, *swilk* appears in # 285, # 295 (× 6), # 297 (× 4), # 1400 and # 1700 (× 2) (+ *svich* × 2). In parallel, *suilke* is recorded in

⁵ The *LAEME* data which will be presented have been obtained by means of a tag-based search of *such* in order to avoid inaccuracies, since a form-based search of *sike*, for example, yields cases which represent variants of *sick* and *sigb*. Hence, 522 cases and 838 tokens have been found. Needless to say, this search has provided instances of ME palatalised variants —*svich* or *sviche*—, of cases distinguished by the retention of /w/ and /l/ —*swuch* or *swilche*—, as well as examples indicative of /k/: *silk* or *swilk*. For obvious reasons, cases suggestive of /ʃ/ have been disregarded, thereby restricting our analysis to 62 cases and 66 tokens: *silk*, *slik*, *suilk*, *suilke*, etc.

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, forms occur only once in each text. No mention is made in this paper as regards their specific function as adjectives, pronouns, conjunctions, etc. in the sources mentioned. References to *LAEME* texts follow the index of sources made by Laing (2008) for *LAEME* database. # 150 refers to London, British Library, Arundel 292, entry 2 (fols. 4r–10v) dated between the last decades of the 13th century and the first years of the 14th century; # 151 corresponds to Oxford Bodleian Library, Bodley 26 (fols. 107r–108r, 192r–201r) dated to the end of the 13th century; # 155 refers to Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 444 (fols. 1r–41r line 2) dated c.1325; # 282 corresponds to Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc 108, entry 2 (fols. 200v–203v) dated to the last years of the 13th century; # 285 indicates Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc 108, entry 3 (fols. 204r–219va) dated to the first years of the 14th century; # 297 refers to Edinburgh, Royal College of Physicians, MS of *Cursor Mundi*, entry 1 (fols. 1r–15v) also dated to the first decades of the 14th century; # 1400 corresponds to Cambridge University Library Ff.II.33. (fols. 20r–v, 22r–24r, 27v–28r, 45r–47r, 48r–50r) dated c.1300. For further information on any of these, see Laing (2008).

⁷ Laing (2008: 165) admits that the language of # 282 has been provisionally localised to the Isle of Ely, although its provenance from West Norfolk or North-East Suffolk is also possible.

#188, #296, #297, #1400 and #1700 (×4) (+ *suich* ×2).⁸ Again, written testimonies to the northern and eastern distribution of /k/ are clearly manifest. More specifically, these latter forms are rather more common in northern areas, for only #285, #1400 and #1700 corroborate its usage in West Norfolk texts. Indeed, #188 provides a documentary hint about its presence in Durham, at the time that #295 and #296 support the Yorkshire distribution of the voiceless velar plosive in early ME times. In particular, these have been localised to the West Riding of Yorkshire and the City of York, respectively. Thirdly, the document #297 testifies to the existence of unpalatalised variants in the East Riding of Yorkshire: *silk*, *schilke*. Simultaneously, *silk* is also attested in source #220 where traits closely localised to an area comprising central Nottinghamshire and South-West Lincolnshire are to be found.⁹

It appears that in early ME those variants distinguished by the lack of palatalisation were more frequent in some northern counties such as Yorkshire, as well as in some East and North-East Midland areas. It is rather adventurous to state that /k/ was chiefly restricted to the aforementioned counties, since the hitherto available documents are not fully comprehensive. Yet, written records from late ME do also disclose a similar landscape.

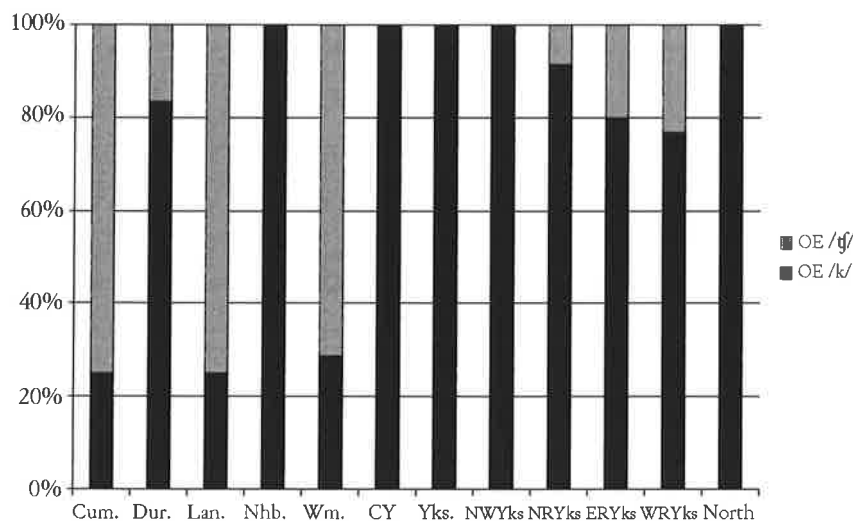
Taking the more abundant evidence compiled in *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (henceforth *LALME*), it is easy to make a rough

⁸ #188 refers to London, British Library, Cotton Julius A v. (fols. 180r–181v) dated to the first decades of the 14th century; #295 corresponds to London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian A.iii. (fols. 2ra–10vb of *Cursor Mundi* only) dated to the early 14th century; #296 indicates Edinburgh, Royal College of Physicians, MS of *Cursor Mundi*, entry 3 (fols. 37r–50v) also dated to the early 14th century; #1700 corresponds to London, British Library, Cotton Cleopatra C vi, entry 3 (fols. 22v, 23r, 57v, 199r) dated to the 13th century.

⁹ Tagged text #220 corresponds to Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 86, entry 4 (fols. 165r–168r), dated 1272–1282. Side by side with *silk*, *selk*, *selke* and *sulke* are found in #220 too. These have not been taken as sound evidence for our purpose, since a mixed language has been recognised in this source: North-East Midland features are interwoven with South-West Midland aspects of the Digby scribe. See further Laing (2008: 158).

sketch of the distribution of the unpalatalised consonant later in time.¹⁰ As far as the North of England is concerned, Graph 1 shows that /k/-forms predominate over palatalised variants in the eastern counties of Durham, Northumberland and Yorkshire. Conversely, ⟨ch⟩-spellings are more profusely attested in texts localised to the western dialects of Cumberland, Lancashire and Westmorland.¹¹

Graph 1. Late ME distribution of (un)palatalised variants in northern counties



¹⁰ Unlike *LAEME*, tag- or form-based automatic searches are not available with *LALME*. Thus, the late ME data presented have been extracted manually from the Linguistic Profiles (LPs) of the counties considered that appear in volume 3 of *LALME*. In particular, 326 examples of *sich* have been obtained, out of which 255 show /k/ and 71 /g/. *LALME* only provides scholars with relative frequencies of co-variants, which makes any conclusion on the distribution of /k/ rather tentative; see *LALME* (vol. 3: xiv).

¹¹ In Graphs 1 and 2 abbreviations of northern English counties follow the traditional nomenclature for pre-1974 English dialects as used in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (1981). Cum. stands for 'Cumberland', Dur. for 'Durham', Lan. for 'Lancashire', Nhb. for 'Northumberland', Wm. for 'Westmorland', CY for 'City of York', NWYks refers to the 'North-West Riding of Yorkshire', NRYks to the 'North Riding of Yorkshire', ERYks to the 'East Riding of Yorkshire' and WRYks to the 'West Riding of Yorkshire'.

	OE /k/	OE /tʃ/	TOTAL
Cum.	1	3	4
Dur.	5	1	6
Lan.	11	33	44
Nhb.	5	0	5
Wm.	2	5	7
CY	5	0	5
Yks.	1	0	1
NWYks	5	0	5
NRVks	21	2	23
ERYks	16	4	20
WRYks	76	23	99
North	31	0	31
TOTAL	179	71	250

Although the amount of extant written records and the examples recorded vary greatly from one county to another, a comparative evaluation of data appears to exemplify distinctions between certain dialects. Inaccurate as this might be, it may help us get an idea, however, about the areas in which /k/ was somehow more widespread than /tʃ/. Furthermore, as it has been pointed out, the impossibility to know the exact frequencies of the cases retrieved makes any attempt to obtain a clear picture of the distribution of /k/ rather complex. Significantly, McIntosh (1989: 104 n.14) brings to our attention that

the absence of a Scandinavian word, e.g. *slik* 'such', from a given text may only sometimes be ascribable to the regular attested preference of that text for some alternative native word, e.g. *sich*. In other cases it may be that the absence in a text of any sample of *slik* is due to nothing more than the absence throughout that text of the need to use any word for 'such'. [...] a search for occurrences of native equivalents to Scandinavian words is therefore obviously desirable. This kind of problem is critical, even when the use of very common words is in question, where one is dealing with short localised documentary texts.

As is also true of the early ME period, certain North-East Midland territories are also characterised by /k/ in late ME; differences are attested, though. Firstly, it is worth noting that quite an abundant number of instances of <ch> have been documented in Lincolnshire (50 examples vs. 32 cases of /k/); no occurrences of this spelling are documented in

LAEME texts belonging to this county. At the same time, some scattered examples suggestive of the velar stop have been found in Nottinghamshire; palatalised forms outweigh them, though.¹² As far as Norfolk is concerned, 162 examples of *such* are documented in the LPs ascribed to this county, out of which 17 are distinguished by a velar stop, and 145 by ⟨ch⟩-spellings. It seems obvious that by the late ME period the palatalised consonant gained currency in those North-East and East Midlands territories where /k/ was also present in early ME. Unfortunately, it is not possible to ascertain fully whether this points clearly to the diachronic as well as to the diatopic variation regarding the distribution of /k/, for the amount of documentary evidence from early ME is rather more restricted than that provided by *LALME*. Yet, it appears so.

It goes without saying that one of the most outstanding traits that distinguishes northern and southern English is the contrast between /k/ and /tʃ/ in word pairs such as *kirn* vs. *churn*, *kist* vs. *chest*, etc. Being an attractive issue for dialect research, it is not an easy task to decide whether some unpalatalised variants are borrowings from ON or, on the contrary, the OE forms were influenced by their ON cognates.

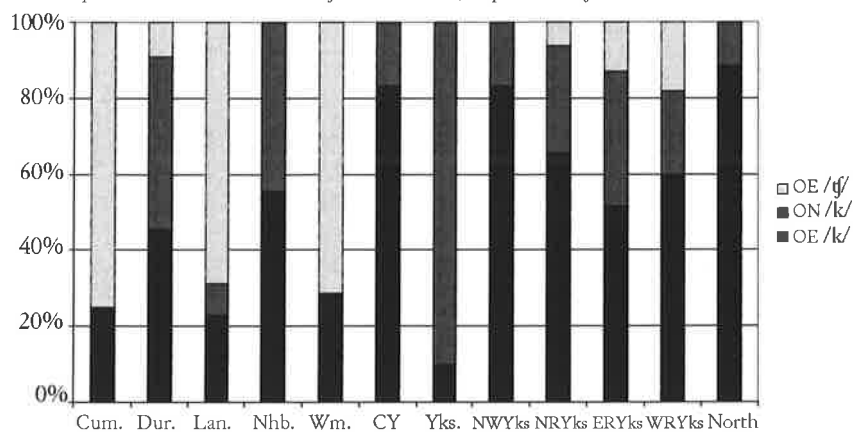
Looking back at the occurrences of /k/ in early ME, it has been found that reflexes of the ON etymon *slikr* were scattered in Yorkshire documents. In particular, tokens of *slic*, *slik*, *slike* and *sliik* are documented in texts #296, #297 and #298. These occurrences are less numerous than those which point back to an OE origin. Still, it appears far from coincidental that the ON and the OE /k/-variants somehow find a similar distribution.

Indeed, the assessment of late ME data, as illustrated in Graph 2, corroborates that forms descending from ON were virtually confined to those northern dialects whose written documents manifested a preponderance of OE /k/-variants over ⟨ch⟩-spellings. Again, instances of the ON cognate are not so copious, to the extent that they are usually combined with OE unpalatalised forms. By way of illustration, LP 487 for the North-West of Yorkshire shows a scribal preference for *swyllke* followed by *swilke*, *swylk* and *slyke*. In spite of this, it seems no accident that the

¹² /k/-variants attested in Nottinghamshire do all seemingly correspond to ON *slikr*, i.e. *slike* and *slyke*. See below.

ON and the OE unpalatalised cases are documented more profusely in the same areas.

Graph 2. Late ME distribution of ON and OE (un)palatalised forms in northern counties



	OE /k/	ON /k/	OE /tʃ/	TOTAL
Cum.	1	0	3	4
Dur.	5	5	1	11
Lan.	11	4	33	48
Nhb.	5	4	0	9
Wm.	2	0	5	7
CY	5	1	0	6
Yks.	1	9	0	10
NWYks.	5	1	0	6
NRYks.	21	9	2	32
ERYks.	16	11	4	31
WRYks.	76	28	23	127
North	31	4	0	35
TOTAL	179	76	71	326

In parallel, cases of ON ancestry are attested in North-East Midland districts too. Although, as pointed out above, <ch>-sequences outnumber <k>-spellings in late ME Lincolnshire, documentary evidence supporting the distribution of Scandinavian forms is also present: 11 examples of *slike*

and *slyk(e)*. As far as Nottinghamshire is concerned, a 100% of /k/-forms —*slike*, *slyke* (×2)— descending from ON is attested.¹³

In view of the above discussion, unpalatalised variants of *such* hardly descend from the OE dative singular *swilcum*, *swylcum* in certain northern English counties.¹⁴ The presence of ON-derived forms in Yorkshire, Durham or Northumberland might account for the documentation of /k/. Indeed, the outstanding absence of Scandinavian forms in Lancashire, Westmorland and Cumberland may explain the higher frequency of ⟨ch⟩-spellings and, therefore, why /tʃ/ was apparently more widespread in these northern districts. This should be taken with caution, for, I insist, further evidence from areas such as Cumberland, where little ME material has come down to us, could modify these conclusions.

It seems that /k/ should not be interpreted as a lexical borrowing either. The occurrence of ON variants is more restricted than those of an OE origin. Actually, the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *OED* show that forms indicative of a Scandinavian ancestor —*slyk(e)*, *slik*, *slic*, *sli*, *sclike*, *slik(ke)*, etc.— are hardly attested after the fifteenth century, whereas reduced unpalatalised variants of OE *swilc*, *swylc* —*sick*, *sik*, *sike*, *syke*, etc.— are documented well into the 1800s. Hence, the velar plosive /k/ may be due to the ON cognate as a result of sound substitution in northern and eastern territories. In this vein, Townend (2002: 206–207) convincingly argues that

there are two ways of regarding these Norse variants in Middle English [*kirk* vs. *chirche*, *fisk* vs. *fish*, etc.]: either as the result of lexical imposition through shift or as English words showing Norse

¹³ Wakelin (1991: 132) indicates that the twentieth-century distribution of *sike* stretches down to Lincolnshire according to the recordings of the *Survey of English Dialects* (1962–1971).

¹⁴ Macafee's (1997: 203) theory (see above, p. 126) is by no means erroneous. In fact, no single instance of ON-derived variants is found among the data surveyed by *A Linguistic Atlas of Older Scots* (2007). On the contrary, plenty of tokens of *swilk*, *swilke*, etc. are documented, which might sustain her view as far as Scots is concerned. Furthermore, Thomason and Kaufman (1988) hold that "Six of these new Norse-origin features remained peculiar to Deira, that is, they never spread to Northumberland or Scotland: *sliik*, *are*, *ahte*, *ert*, *a-mell*, *-scap*." Our data show that ON variants were present in Northumberland, though. The *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (s.v. *sic*) or *The Scottish National Dictionary* (s.v. *sic*) do not account for the Scandinavian cognate either.

phonological substratum influence, and in some ways the latter seems more plausible, [...] The suggestion, then, is simply that (for example) *bleik* represents ME *blok* pronounced with a Norse accent (that is, with Norse phonology imposed), initially by those who have shifted from Norse to English but subsequently [...] by those whose first and only language is English.¹⁵

In sum, the evidence yielded by *LAEME* and *LALME*, which provide unprecedented access to ME material, aids us to clarify at some points the diachronic background of terms that, like *sike*, have posed doubts to linguists. A comparative evaluation of extant data from early and late ME suggests that the presence of ON-derived variants appears to explain the existence of unpalatalised forms in certain eastern and northern areas, and does, therefore, shed light upon the history of a regionalism whose origin has remained rather doubtful to date. Needless to say, further data and research will back or contradict these preliminary assumptions.¹⁶

Javier Ruano-García
University of Salamanca

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¹⁵ Townend (2002: 205) also emphasises that “source language agentivity – is in particular the most plausible explanation for the presence in Middle English of [...] Norse- and English-derived lexical variants differing only in phonology. Many of them represent core vocabulary, and so borrowing on account of need cannot be the explanation for the presence of these items in English; borrowing on account of prestige also seems unlikely, since as far as one can tell [...] they enter English at the time of Old Norse language death.” See further Townend (2006: 83–84).

¹⁶ An evaluation of /k/- vs. /tʃ/-variants in the light of the ME section of the Helsinki Corpus will provide relevant data as far as the text types in which each form is used, or information on the particular contexts in which ON- and OE-derived variants were preferred. This is a matter for future research, since it goes beyond the scope of this note. I am particularly grateful to one of the anonymous referees of these pages for kindly bringing this to my attention.

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Received 06 Feb 2009; revision received 07 Apr 2009; accepted 20 May 2009