A Guide to the *proper Pronunciation*
of the Anglo-Saxon („Old English") Language
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In this document I would like to lay forth the pronunciation of Old English, also known (preferably, in my case, even[1]) as „Anglo-Saxon". The pronunciations I have arrived upon for this document have been arrived at by looking at Anglo-Saxon words from multiple angles for their pronunciations; this includes looking into the words' past, to Proto-Germanic and to other Germanic languages, looking into the words' future, to Middle and Modern English, and by comparing the work of many people more qualified than myself. Although I am admittedly a layman I believe that the pronunciations presented below come quite close to what was historically spoken in Anglo-Saxon England. Although my concern was primarily with the Mercian dialect, this document will cover the West Saxon dialect, as it is the most commonly encountered. I will employ IPA in my descriptions but as well include information within the text so that the IPA-illiterate may also have a basic understanding of the sounds (though nothing can substitute for IPA knowledge).

Anglo-Saxon is very much unlike Modern English, and using Modern English as a basis for your pronunciations will prove a great mistake with regards to accuracy, especially if you take cues from Modern English orthography. The main mistake able to be made by relying too heavily on Modern English spelling to understand the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon is, beyond the mess that has been made of English's vowel system by means of the Great Vowel Shift, that you will tend to read certain letters as silent, when in Anglo-Saxon silent letters *were not a thing*. The word *cniht*, meaning a boy, for example, is tempting to read with a silent „c" and „h", to parallel our *knight*, thus arriving at something like [nit], but the correct pronunciation was [kniçt], with no such silencing. Pronunciation is about 70 percent predictable from the period spelling alone (that is, with no diacritics to aid in pronunciation), and with the modern length markers and palatalization markers it is about 98 percent predictable.

The Consonants

Anglo-Saxon consonants are, compared to vowels, the more similar to Modern English, which means that learning the sounds themselves should prove no difficulty. The correspondence between written letter and spoken sound, however, is different in many ways to our spellings. Some uncertainties, due to Anglo-Saxon being dead long before the invention of recorded sound, are abound, and these will be noted.

- <b> /b/, <d> /d/, <l> /l/, <m> /m/, <n> /n/, <p> /p/, <t> /t/, <x> /ks/ are identical to English, or close enough that simply saying them as in English is unlikely to raise any eyebrows.
  - More precisely, /l/ should be pronounced as in British English, with light [l] leading the syllable and dark [ɫ] ending it. To do as an American and pronounce [ɫ] in all positions is, however, acceptable.
  - Whether /p/ and /t/ should be pronounced aspirated when word-initial as in Modern English, as [pʰ] and [tʰ], or non-aspirated as in French or Dutch, as [p] and [t], is unclear, however personally I recommend the aspirated pronunciations, as both English and Scots aspirate these sounds, and many neighbour Germanic languages do likewise.
- <c> is /k/. Similarly to /p/ and /t/, whether or not to aspirate this sound word-initially and say [kʰ] ultimately comes to the preference of the speaker. It is never /s/, as an English „soft" C.
- <ċ>, palatal or soft „c", is /tʃ/, the sound in „cheer". In unmarked texts, this is written <c> as /k/ is, and to determine the pronunciation with exact accuracy requires a knowledge of etymology. (See below, „The Velar and Palatal Sounds").

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1 My preference for the term „Anglo-Saxon" over „Old English" was first realized after the latter was used as part of an argument that the Scots language is no more than a dialect of English, „since they both come from Old *English*".

- <g> is /g/. Word-initially, when geminate, and after /n/ it is pronounced [g], precisely as English „g" in „go". Medially when single, it is pronounced as a sound unfamiliar to English, [ɣ]. This sound is produced by positioning your mouth to say [g], but not letting your tongue touch the roof of your mouth completely. In the event you find yourself unable to say this sound, substituting it with „w" or „y", depending on the frontness of the preceding vowel[2], will suffice, although representing a „Middle English" pronunciation. Word-finally it merges with /h/, and spellings with <h> and <g> alternating are not uncommon: burg/burh, stāh/stāg.
- <ġ> is /j/. Word-initially, and mid and finally when not geminated, /j/ is realised as [j], the „y" sound in „yes". When geminated, or after /n/, it is instead pronounced [dʒ], the „J" in „John". When geminated, /jj/ is usually spelt <ċġ>, rather than <ġġ>. As with <ċ>, in unmarked texts /j/ and /g/ are orthographically identical.
- <f> <s> <þ/ð> represent /f/ /s/ /θ/, which are pronounced as [f s θ] (as in "fit", "sit", "thick") when word-initial and final (for example "þū" /θu:/ [θu:], "weras" /werɑs/ [werɑs]), and doubled (for example "oððe" [oθθe]) but they are pronounced as [v z ð] (as in "vat", "zip", "then") when surrounded by voiced sounds (usually vowels). (for example the noun hūs /hu:s/ [hu:s], but the verb hūsian /hu:siɑn/ [hu:ziɑn]). Þ (thorn) and ð (eth) are completely interchangeable, and in early Anglo-Saxon <th> is seen, it too is interchangeable with þ.
- <h> represents /h/. At the beginning of a word this sounds much like an English "h", however after a vowel it was likely pronounced in a manner remniscent of the German ch, as [x] or [ç], depending on what vowel precedes it. (for example "lāh" /lɑ:h/ [lɑ:x], cniht /kniht/ [kniçt].) H is pronounced everywhere, including in words like <hring> or <hlāf>.
- <r> is pronounced as "some kind of R", which is notated /r/ for convenience's sake. There is no conclusive evidence exactly how an Anglo-Saxon would have said his "R", but usually it is assumed to have been a "rolled R" [r], as in Latin, or a "tapped R" [ɾ], as in Spanish. It is very unlikely that /r/ was pronounced as [ɹ], like in present-day English. What is extremely easily provable is that the Anglo-Saxons said their "R"s everywhere in a word, and did not drop or vocalize them like in today's British English.
- <sc> originally represented /sk/ (like "skip"), however this was palatalized to /ʃ/ (as in "ship"), and unlike the palatalization of <c> or <g> this seems to have become near-universal at least word-initially, occurring even before consonants (for example "sċrūd" /ʃru:d/). However, words such as āscian /ɑ:skiɑn/ (which became "ask") show that it was still /sk/ where <c> would be /k/ non-word initially.
- <ƿ> (wynn) was the most common way of writing the sound /w/ (as in "way") in Anglo-Saxon times, although some documents use <uu>, a literal "double U". However most modern Anglo-Saxon editions and most neo-Anglo-Saxon online, including my own, uses <w> instead of <ƿ> for ease of reading. /w/ is pronounced everywhere, including in words like "wrītan" /wri:tɑn/.
- Some rare spellings that have not already been mentioned include <k> instead of <c> for /k/, which finds its most common use in words like <kyning>, where <c> could appear to be palatalized, and <qu> instead of <cƿ/cw> for /kw/.

The Velar and Palatal Sounds

The velar sounds /k/ /g/ and the palatal sounds /tʃ/ /j/ primarily have their origins in what was originally allophony, for example pre-Anglo-Saxon *drankiją̄n /drankijɑ̃n/ [drɑɲcijɑ̃n], *gefą̄n /gefɑ̃n/ [ɟevɑ̃n][3]. However, later processes such as umlaut brought front vowels in front of velar consonants after palatalization had stopped being productive, for example Proto-Germanic *kunją > *kunnja > *künnja > *künna > Anglo-Saxon *cynn* [kynn]. Thus by the time of Anglo-

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2   For example: *flēogan* [fleː.o̯.ɣɑn] might be approximated as [fleː.o̯.wɑn]. *Stīgan* [stiːɣɑn], however, would be approximated as [stiːjɑn].

3   My Proto-West-Germanic forms are based primarily on Don Ringe and Ann Taylor's *The Development of Old English*.

Saxon the palatal sounds were (at least marginally) phonemic. However in many ways they still behaved closer to allophones and the distribution of the sounds is mostly predictable.

- Before back vowels <a o u>, <c> and <g> are usually velar. A common exception is before verb ending -an, for example in *sēċan* (later *sēċan*) or *drenċan*; this is because at the time of palatalisation the words looked like *sōkiją̄n and the aforementioned *drankiją̄n.
- Before <e>, <i>, <ea>, <eo>, and <ie>, excepting the verb ending -ian (which at the time of palatalisation looked like *ōją̄n), <c> and <g> are palatal.
- Before the front vowels which resulted from umlaut, <œ> and <y>, <c> and <g> are velar. This unfortunately is somewhat complicated as <œ> and <e> merged in most dialects of Anglo-Saxon (and in later West Saxon <ie> and <y> merged). This is why a good knowledge of etymology, or a marked edition, is the only way to be sure of the pronunciation of a word.
- Before a consonant, <c> is always velar but <g> can remain palatal. <ng>, however, does become velar /ng/ rather than palatal /nj/.
- <c> is palatal word-finally when preceded by <i>. Other front vowels can superficially appear to palatalize <c>; for example in *bēċ,* later *bēċ*, but in fact these were palatalized by an *i* which later disappeared; at the time of palatalization the word looked like *bōki. *Blæc* „black" shows that front vowels other than <i> did not, in fact, have the power to palatalise <c>.
- <g>, on the other hand, was palatalised in such environments: *mæġ*, which at the time of palatalization was *mæg, with no deleted <i> to palatalize it.

The Monophthongs

Anglo-Saxon's monophthongs are overall unremarkable for an old Germanic language, and are fairly close to Modern German, however they are very far from Modern English. The language which has the best match that I have found, by far, is Finnish: pronouncing „a, e, i, o, u, æ, œ, y, ā, ē, ī, ō, ū, ǣ, œ̄, ȳ" exactly as Finnish „a, e, i, o, u, ä, ö, y, aa, ee, ii, oo, uu, ää, öö, yy" is essentially perfect. For those of us who are not lucky enough to be from Finland or to speak the language well[4], however, it is necessary to explain the sounds per IPA.

- <a> is pronounced /ɑ/, which is pronounced as the Dutch „man"
- <e> is pronounced /e/, which is pronounced as the French „été"
- <i> is pronounced /i/, which is pronounced as the French „vie"
- <o> is pronounced /o/, which is pronounced as the Spanish „todo"
- <u> is pronounced /u/, which is pronounced as the French „tous"
- <æ> is pronounced /æ/, which is pronounced as the English „hat"
- <y> is pronounced /y/, which is pronounced as the French „luth"
- <œ> is pronounced /ø/, which is pronounced as the French „feu"

The long vowels are merely the same sounds pronounced longer, and one can simply imagine saying the short vowel twice after the other. Thus „hātan" /hɑːtan/ can really be imagined as being pronounced hɑ-ɑ-tan. <œ>, as has already been stated above, merged with <e> in the majority of Anglo-Saxon recorded, however older Mercian keeps œ̄ and ē distinct.

Some are of the opinion that the short vowels should be, rather than identical with their long counterparts as in Finnish, more lax, as in German. Then <e ē, i ī, o ō, u ū, œ œ̄, y ȳ> would be pronounced /ɛ eː, ɪ iː, ɔ oː, ʊ uː, œ øː, ʏ yː/, paralleling their German counterparts. <a, æ> would be unaffected.

The Diphthongs

Anglo-Saxon as a whole has the following diphthongs: <ea>, <eo>, <io>, <ie>, and long counterparts for each. These were pronounced /æɑ/ /eo/, /iu/ and possibly /iy/ (see the next paragraph for more detail about <ie>). The long counterparts were simply the same, but with the

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4 A group which includes myself.

first element held longer; thus if ea eo io and ie are *äa, eo, iu, iy,* their long counterparts are *ääa, eeo, iiu, iiy.* These are in my opinion the hardest sounds to master, especially <ea>. The diphthong <ie> is only found in the West Saxon dialect, and for example Mercian is missing it completely: thus West Saxon hīeran vs. Mercian hēran, West Saxon wierþ vs. Mercian wiorþeþ, weorþeþ, West Saxon ġiefan vs. Mercian ġeofan. <io> only appears in earlier Anglo-Saxon, and by the end of Anglo-Saxon had completely merged with <eo>. In Late West Saxon <ie> and <y> merged to /y/. Thus unless specifically looking at Early West Saxon you are most likely to only see the two diphthongs <eo>, <ea>.

The pronunciation of <ie> is one of the greatest uncertainties in the Anglo-Saxon phonetic system. The value /iy/, which I use, is only one of the many possible pronunciations put forth by linguists. Another very common pronunciation argued for is that it was pronounced as spelt, /ie/. A possibility that it was a monophthong /ɪ/ (as in English „is") is also not unheard of. Fulk even proposes that it was pronounced /iu/, although with this already being the value of <io> that seems odd. The later merge with <y>, before <y> and <i> themselves merged, suggests a rounded element to the diphthong, and thus I imagine /iy/ to be the most accurate guess we have.

Sometimes the diphthong spellings <eo>, <ea> may have actually indicated the monophthongs <o/u>, <a>. There are only a handful of such words where this is the case: ġeong /jung/ "young", sċeacan /ʃakan/ "shake", sċeafan /ʃafɑn/ "shave", sċeolan /ʃulɑn/ "to owe, to "must") and its past tense sċeolde /ʃolde/ "should, had to". These words all have alternate spellings without <e>: iung, sċacan, sċafan, sċulan, sċolde, and all have etymologies that link them back to a monophthong: sċeacan and sċeafan are Strong Class 6 verbs and these almost all share a common stem vowel /ɑ/, sċulan/sċolde come from *skulaną and *skuldē, and iung comes from *jungaz. Sometimes, the Modern English cognate can help clear up what a vowel sounded like, however this is not always the case. For example, a word like ċēosan has a modern descendent with a back vowel: "choose", suggesting a pronunciation *ċōsan. However, the Proto-Germanic stem of this word shows a front vowel: *keusaną. However "young", "should" both accurately show a descendent of ġeong and sċeolde with a back vowel, for example.

The Unstressed Monophthongs

Unlike in stressed syllables, where there were as many as 24 (although most realistically 18 to 20) distinct vowels, counting length and diphthongs, in (fully) unstressed syllables there were only three, most commonly spelt <a e o>, although <i u> for the latter are *not* uncommon. <i> for <e> was especially prevalent in certain endings, like -isċ, -liċ, -iġ, -ian, etc. while <u/o> seemed to be in free variation. The pronunciation of these vowels is therefore something along the lines of [ɑ e o] or [ɑ i u]. One possibility is that the latter two vowels were pronounced [ɪ ʊ], in between the two tenser vowels. I am not capable to make such a claim with any authority, as I have not read it in the work of any linguist, and I am myself a layman, but it is personally an assumption I make when speaking Old English.

Consonantal Assimilations

The combinations "dþ", "tþ" were probably assimilated to a geminated /tt/, and this is evidenced by a high number of writings with <tt> where a "d/t" and a "þ" would meet: itt for *it-ð from etan, etc. It is likely that even when <tþ>, <dþ> were written, /tt/ was meant, and this was merely an etymological manner of writing. Similarly, it is likely that all instances of <sþ> were actually /st/, again as evidenced by a large number of <st> spellings being found where s and þ would meet: līest, lēast for *lēas-þu, from lēas, and also by Modern English: *nostril* from nosþryl, from "nosu" + "þyrel".