THE VOICING OF INITIAL FRICATIVES IN MIDDLE ENGLISH*

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The voicing of initial fricatives in English still poses important problems. There is no agreement as to when the voicing began to operate, how it spread, how far the process affecting particular fricatives was identical and so forth. The genesis of the initial fricative /θ/ raises special question.

For Modern English dialects an overall survey of the available material was presented by Ellis (1889). However, his treatment of the voicing of /θ/ is less systematic and hence less reliable than that of the voicing of /ʃ/, /s/ and /z/. The Survey of English Dialects (Orton et al. 1962–71) also records a number of instances of the voicing of all four fricatives in word-initial (Anlaut) position in the South and the South-West Midlands. On the basis of Ellis’s material, as well as that collected by SED (some of it unpublished but recorded by fieldworkers in conversation with informants), Wakelin and Barry (1988) have provided us with an excellent up-to-date overview of the problem as it is reflected in contemporary dialects; this also has relevance for earlier stages of English.

As mentioned above, forms attesting the voicing of initial fricatives can be found nowadays in the South and South-West Midlands (see Map 1). Sporadic occurrences of voiced forms in other areas may suggest a boundary which once lay more to the north and east than the current one. Initial voiced fricatives also appear in place names from roughly the same area (Ekwall 1940).

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and Smith (1970). One should be careful, however, with the onomastic evidence: some place names have appeared with the initial voiced fricatives only since the eighteenth century, e.g. Vauxhall from earlier Faulkehaile since 1719 (Wakelin and Barry 1968:82).

The orthographic evidence from earlier English for the occurrence and geographical distribution of the voicing of initial fricatives, is unfortunately limited and gives no grounds for drawing even tentative isoglosses for the medieval distribution of /ʃ/, /ʒ/ and /ʒ/. There is no early spelling evidence at all for /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. The abundant ⟨u⟩/⟨v⟩ spellings permit scholars to establish a genuine /f–v/ line in medieval times, and the very limited ⟨z⟩ forms give some hints about the /s–z/ line. Whatever can be said about the earlier distribution of the other fricatives must be based on evidence provided by Modern English dialects.

Standard accounts of the voicing of initial fricatives in the existing handbooks of early English deal with the dating of the process, its geographical distribution and spread, and (more rarely) its origin. With varying degrees of thoroughness these accounts usually deal only with the treatment of the change, affecting /ʃ/–/ʒ/. With the notable exceptions of Horn and Lehnert (1954) Flasdieck (1958), Brunner (1963) and Wakelin and Barry (1968) /ʃ/ is usually ignored. Below we shall take up each of the above mentioned problems connected with the voicing process and discuss the position in Middle English times.

Since the occurrence of /ʃ/ as an alternative to ⟨s⟩ forms is rarer in Modern English dialects, and hence not usually considered to have been characteristic for Middle English, a crucial question has to be answered before any attempt is made to establish the situation about voicing in Middle English: what relation if any holds between the voicing of each of the four fricatives. In other words, we must try to establish whether we are in the presence of a unitary process which affected all four sounds or whether we are dealing with more than one process. There is no convincing evidence that there were four independent processes. On the contrary, as will be argued below, it would seem that a unitary interpretation is the most satisfactory one. The voicing is in each case a phonetic process of weakening (lenition). That the change may have affected each of the fricatives to a somewhat different extent is not surprising in any such historical process involving a spread through the complex inventory of a language and over the area where that language was spoken. The relationship between the patterns of distribution of forms showing initial voicing of /ʃ/–/ʒ/–/ʒ/ is revealing (see Map 1). If one assumes that the change in question constitutes a unitary process, this will have obvious consequences for the reconstruction and interpretation of the ME dialect situation.

We may consider the matter of the date of this process. We shall see later that the postulation of a particular date for it has a bearing on matters relating to the position of the interpretation of initial voiced fricatives in ME. For reasons which will become clear a little later the discussion of the voicing of /ʃ/ will be postponed until the evidence of Modern English dialects has been discussed.

Views about the date when voicing of initial fricatives took place vary considerably. Sweet (1888:139) suggested that the process originated while the Germanic tribes who later invaded England were still on the Continent. This idea was later taken up by Bennet (1955), who argued that it was a Low Franconian process acquired by Juto-Frisians and English Saxons (who settled in Kent and the South-West) and brought to England. It should be mentioned here that the voicing of initial fricatives also occurred in Old High German and Old Low Franconian and was recorded in the 9th century and 11th century respectively. Samuels (1971) in a penetrating essay concerning relations between the Low Countries and Kent has pointed out that there is no compelling evidence for this change (among other changes) having originated on the Continent: on this basis the issue cannot be settled one way or another. If the Continental hypothesis were to be accepted, the voicing would be a process which preceded the Germanic invasion of England but which did not find orthographic corroboration until much later and then only partially. The view of most scholars, however, is that the voicing only took place in Old English or even early Middle English. Brunner (1965),1 Berndt (1960) and Pinker (1974) state that the voicing of initial fricatives dates back to the tenth century.

Flasdieck (1958:364) would place it between the time of King Alfred and the Benedictine reform, i.e. between the second half of the 9th century and 10th century. These views are based on what seems to be the oldest spelling evidence for the voicing /ʃ/–/ʒ/, i.e. the form wif for /wif/ ‘five’ which appears twice in the Guild Statute of Bedwyn, Wilt., from about the year 980.

Ellis (1889:38), Kjedeler and Kjærgaard (1938:94–6) and Luick (1914/1946:933) assumed that the change did not take place till the eleventh century. Jordan (1934/1974:154) concurs as regards the voicing of initial /ʃ/ but points out that “with some it can be proved surely only in Kent since 14th century, with /ʃ/ in the same period only in unaccented words like this, that, then in Kent and EMIL”.

Jespersen (1909:42) would place the voicing still later in the 12th century; he gives no reasons for the dating. Nor do J. and E. M. Wright (1928), who rather vaguely place it as late Old English or early Middle English.

Dobson (1968, II:360), with reference to [0], assumes that voicing took place first in unstressed words in the 14th century, and thereafter [ʃ] was also extended to stressed words.

1 Brunner is, however, less explicit and more careful about assigning a definite date to the change in his earlier work (1965:375–6), saying only that it is quite possible that the change occurred already in Old English but not too early; it had to take place, on the other hand, before the influx of French loanwords into English.
Which of these proposed datings, then is most feasible? Indeed can we adduce good grounds for any dating rather than another? There seem to be four types of evidence available to us whereby we might attempt to establish the date when the voicing took place: (1) typological-comparative evidence, (2) the distribution of voicing in the pre-Conquest lexicon, (3) the Old and Middle English spelling, and (4) the evidence of the dialects of modern England. Let us consider each of these types.

As has already been suggested, typological-comparative arguments that some related WG languages exhibit initial voicing and that this could have been brought over by the invaders of southern England are inconclusive: it is at least equally likely that the development of initial voiced stops was a parallel independent development rather than a borrowing.

The spelling evidence for earlier Middle English is weak. Copious examples of the voicing come only from the 13th century and later. Since written language in the 11th century was rather standardized it is quite likely that the orthographic system of the spoken language only after certain other circumstances had arisen (such as the weakening or decay of the standard, e.g. in the hands of foreign or foreign-trained scribes). The fact that the spelling evidence comes in the main from the 13th century and after points to the likelihood of the voicing of initial fricatives already in England and at the time when the written standard had been formed. If one looks, however, at the geographical distribution of Middle English forms (both from localized MSS as well as locally attested place and personal names, e.g. as recorded in Lay Subsidy Rolls and other documents, see Map 2 and 4), one may hazard the suggestion that the spread of voicing follows the pattern of the spread of early Kentish innovations in the 7th century (see DeCamp 1959). In that case the voicing may be a phenomenon brought to England at the time of the Germanic invasion or it may have originated only in Britain and then spread throughout the South-West, the South-West Midlands in early Old English times (cf. place names in Essex, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire) and further northwards in Middle English (see Map 4). In any event we believe that the process was still going on in Early Middle English times (cf. Wakelin and Barry 1968 on its even later productivity). But by second half of the 14th century and in the 15th century the distribution was beginning to recede southwards (see Map 6). Corroboration of this can be found in Sunley’s (1963:201–7) discussion of the dialect of Worcester whose initial v- is found four times in SWo and once in NWo in a, 1250, 34 times in SWo and 22 times in NWo between 1300 and 1449, but only five times in SWo and once in NWo between 1400–1449 and finally five times in SWo and not even once in NWo between 1450–1499.

There is no agreement as to whether the voicing process varied from one fricative to another. The spelling evidence, uneven as it is, does not offer possi-
England. Jordan (1974:192) is more specific adding after the listing of MSS which attest that the voicing "is indicated for Stafr. (in part or with withdrawal) Heref., Worc., Glouce., Som., Wilt., Dev., Hants., Kent and probably also Dorset, Sur., Sus.; in the present dialects it is more limited". His hypothesis is based on localized MSS, the position of which has in some cases been challenged.

Berndt (1960:178) has also taken into account place name evidence and suggested that "nach Ausweis von Ortsnamen ist der Übergang von f->paber auch in Essex sehr gewißlich gleichmäßig in Buckinghamshire stark verbreitet und ebenso in Hertfordshire anzutreffen"; the onomastic evidence employed by Berndt comes from Modern English. This would move the boundary of [v-p] to the Thames more to the north. This position has additional support added by Horn and Lehner (1954:938) from early Modern English orthoepists, e.g. Langley (1566), who knew the forms vox 'fox' and nower 'four' as coming from Essex and of (1621) who wrote that v-for f- and z-for s- were found in the south and the east and according to Butler (1834) they appeared 'in the Western parts'.

Branner (1860:376), after noting the difficulty of establishing the border up to which the voiced forms occurred, proposes the following: "Die Grenze dürfte ungefähr längs der Themese verlaufen sein, im Westen aber auch nördliche Gebiete eingeschlossen haben, so Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire and das südliche Worcestershire. ... Nach Ortsnamen wird auch Essex, Hertfordshire und Buckinghamshire wenigstens zum Teil zu dem Gebiet gehört haben, wo stimmbreite Reibelsaute vorkamen ... Von diesem mundartlichen südöstlichen Lautwandel der Übergang zu einem stimmbreitem Anlaut bei den Pronominalstämmen (the, that, this usw.) auseinander zu haften. Dieser ist geographisch und vielleicht bereits in ae. Zeit eingetreten".

Oakden (1930) was the first to draw an actual medieval isogloss (see Map 2) dividing the v-f areas; he produced it on the basis of a few literary texts from the 13th century and 14th century. The second attempt to delimit the same phenomenon on the map was made by Moore et al. (1935). The evidence was taken from "a corpus of definitely localized and dated literary texts and documents" (Moore et al. 1935:1). These covered three centuries although the emphasis was placed on 13th century material (22 literary texts out of 44, and 240 non-literary documents out of 266 are from the time after 1401). The isogloss (see Map 2 and 4) differs somewhat from that of Oakden in that it runs further north from approximately the northeastern border of Berkshire across the middle of Oxfordshire and Worcestershire and (tentatively) the southern border of Shropshire.

The pioneering work of both Oakden and Moore et al. had several shortcomings (see Fisiak 1982, 1984). The major ones for the matter under discussion were the long span of time, despite the "emphasis" on a single century, and the use of a very limited number of localised forms. Moore et al. (1935) are aware of the tentative value of their f-p isogloss, admitting that "the points upon which the isogloss was based are scattered to be entirely convincing" (p. 47), and "although the evidence ... for this dialect characteristic is amply sufficient to prove its existence in ME and even to localize it with pretty definite limits, the boundary that is indicated is less certainly established than most other boundaries" (p. 19).

Comparing the isoglosses of Oakden (basically 14th century) and Moore et al. (15th century) one obtains a false picture of the situation, as will be demonstrated below, i.e. as if the f-p isogloss was still expanding to the north in the 15th century (see Map 2). The evidence adduced by Kristensson (a project in progress for 1290-1350) and McIntosh-Samuel (a project approaching completion for the 15th century) suggests later in the paper that the direction of the shift of this isogloss was the reverse. Additional corroborative evidence for this direction of the movement of the isogloss has been provided by Sandy (1962:201-7) for Worcestershire.

Both Oakden's and Moore's isoglosses as well as more loosely formulated suggestions by other scholars as to the shape of the f->p line have been based on the ME spelling evidence coming from a rather limited number of literary texts and official documents and from Modern English dialects, sometimes supported by additional evidence from place names. Yet because of this the isoglosses have been drawn for [v-p] alone since according to the scholars quoted above there is not enough orthographic evidence for [z-] and none for [£-].

As will be seen below, the distribution of [£-] in Middle English will have to be based entirely on Modern English evidence.

The two recent ME dialect projects mentioned above have already thrown more light on the distribution of v- and z- and have considerably corrected our views. Before presenting the new evidence for a new distribution of the forms in question, a word or two about these projects seems in order.

G. Kristensson published results of his investigations covering the northern counties and Lincolnshire in 1967 and is currently working on the West Midlands. His work covers the span of sixty years (1290-1350) and is based on the examination of surnames and place names in Lay Subsidy Rolls* (other local documents are used for Durham and Cheshire which as palatinate were

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* /f/ will be discussed separately later in the paper.
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4 The reliability of the accounts given by Oakden and Moore et al. has been discussed in Fisiak (1982; 1984).
exempt from the Lay Subsidy). The material investigated is quite extensive; e.g. the Lincolnshire Subsidy Rolls for 1332 alone contain the names of 20,597 tax-payers, and the rolls for 1327 as many as c. 40,000 surnames and 1,500 place names. Because of the nature of the data, the research necessarily concentrates on phonology and follows the principles laid out by Orton for the Survey of English Dialects (SED). The density of localities in Kristenson's survey, however, surpasses by far that achieved by Orton for living dialects.

The Edinburgh Middle English Dialect Project (MEDP) covers approximately the period of 100 years (1350-1450); the bulk of the material is from the second half of that century. The project has investigated several thousand MSS and maps some 1,150 of them. There are 270 items in the main questionnaire. The enquiry is basically oriented towards the cartographic presentation of written Middle English forms. Both literacy texts and local documents have been used. The density of localities is much higher than in SED. In MEDP it is approximately one "informant" (=text) per 50 square miles and per 15,000 inhabitants estimated to have lived in England at the time; in SED the latter ratio is 1:50,000. Some individual maps and a number of papers based on the collected materials have been published so far. The complete Atlas of Middle English dialects is scheduled to go to press in 1984.

The evidence collected by Kristenson (unpublished private communication dated 11th Dec. 1981) moves the boundary of /r/- and /ơ/- considerably further to the north (see Map 4, line D).

Here are some examples illustrating /r/- forms:

**Staffordshire**
Robo *Alte venne* 1332:102 (Hundsworth)

**Warwickshire**
Philip Bulgenck 1332:15 (Honington)

**Worcestershire**
Adam le *Vereo* 1327:4 (Wolverley)

**Willemo Bohynch 1327:16 (Droitwich)**

**William Le Vithelere 1327:33 (Ripple)**

**Foreeld 1327:39 (Fairfield, PNWo 275)**

**Johanne Le *Fynour 1327:44 (Birtsmorton)**

**Robert Le *Vynch 1327:50 (Little Comberton)**

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See Benskin in Benskin and Samuels (1981: XXVII—XLI) and McIntosh (1963) for more details on the Edinburgh project.

On a wider application of the results see Kristenson (1981).

All examples are from Lay Subsidy Rolls. The reference is to page or in the case of unpaged rolls to membrane.

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Willemo Vot* 1332:10—Fot 1327:14 (Blackwell)
Yedevon 1332:17 (Erin Loach, PNWo 49)10

**Oxfordshire**
Alicia Vouer 1316 m. 1 (Churchill)
Willmo le Vole 1316 m. 1 (Walcot)
Petru le Vinch 1316 m. 1 (Chastleton)
Isabella Le Visschere 1316 m. 1 (Cagingwell)
Walto atte Venne 1316 m. 1 (Shippenhill)
Johne le Vole m. 1 (Shippenhill)
Thoma atte Venne 1316 m.² (Sandford St. Martin)
Adam atte Venne 1316 m.² (Thrupp)
Robo le *Vend 1316 m.²—LaVende 1327 m. 4 (King's End)
Walto le Vouer 1316 m. 2—Walto le *Pouare* 1327 m. 5 (Finmore)
Reginaldo le Vithelere 1327 m. 2 (Lynoham)
Johne atte Vortheye 1316 m. 1—Johne atte Vortheye 1327 m. 3 (Spelsbury)
Thoma le Voul 1327 m. 6—Thoma Le *Fowel* 1316 m. 3 (Brooster)
Rogro le *Vould 1327 m. 7 (Blackthorn)
Johne le Voud 1327 m. 7—Johne le Houzel 1316 m. 4 (Forest Hill)
Clementia le *Vatte* 1327 m. 3 (Burford)
Robo le *Vener 1327 m. 11 (Thame)
Johne le *Vatte* 1327 m. 12 (Lower and Upper Standhill)
Thoma le Voul 1327 m. 8 (Handborough)

**Gloucestershire**
Since voiced forms are numerous and occur throughout the county, we shall limit our presentation to listing different forms without identification of the locality. (Gloucestershire has been recognized by all scholars as incontrovertibly a /ơ/- area).

Edith le *Vatte* 1327 m. 8
Nicho le *Visschere* 1327 m. 22
Johne *Vynch* 1327 m. 22
Willmo atte Venne 1327 m. 23
Henricus le Velpe 1312:248
Ricardus le *Volte* 1313:253
Everardo le *Vinch* 1312:242
Robertus atte Voirax 1312:263
Alie *Vrayne* 1312 m. 12

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10 For more examples see Samuels (1983:201—4).
11 No examples of /r/-/ơ/- have been found by Kristenson in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire, Leicestershire or Cheshire. The examples from Herefordshire are limited in general and consist mostly of Celtic names.
As regards /z/-forms, Kristensson has recorded the following instances:

**Staffordshire**
- Roberto Zelymon 1237:199 (Ensen)
- Robto Zelymon 1237:214 (Stafford)
- Rob'to Zelymon 1237:216 (Rochester)

**Worcestershire**
- Thoma Zely 1237:26 (Birmingham)
- Clace Zelmon 1332:21 (Church Honeybourne)

Kristensson’s research is still in progress and further facts may come to light to confirm or disprove claims concerning the course of the /f/>v- and s/>z- border in the East Midlands (i.e. Essex, Hertford and Buckinghamshire).

The McIntosh-Samuels line (see Map 5 and 6) runs somewhat to the south of Kristensson’s in the West Midlands. On the other hand it is to the north of the isogloss as drawn by Oskenen and Moore et al.. The map (Map 5) reproduced here is slightly modified from the original provided by Professor McIntosh in that it does not include information on the frequency of occurrence (“normal”, “less frequent”, “rare”) of forms as was indicated by Professor McIntosh. In the present study we are interested primarily in the geographical range of voiced forms and our isoglosses should be considered as outer boundaries of occurrence of the phenomenon (see Wakelin and Barry 1968:100-1) without regard to the related frequency of voiced and unvoiced form.

The McIntosh-Samuels line for the /f/>v- boundary has been drawn on the basis of 110 MSS out of something like twice that number which were scrutinized altogether. This is quite a large number, which guarantees a high degree of reliability of the obtained result.

The information concerning <z-> spellings for /z/- has been drawn on the basis of only 10 texts (see Map 7) altogether. ME <z-> is very much rarer than <v->

The evidence from Modern English dialects does not actually show voicing in Kent, Surrey and Sussex (where it may have originally started). This, however, may well be due to the influence of Standard English. The ample Middle English evidence both from literary and other texts (see Map 5 and McIntosh (private communication of 22nd April 1982)) and from the onomastic material of local documents (see e.g. Rubin 1951 for Sussex) leaves no doubt about its existence in early English.

Modern place names further help us to establish a distribution of forms with voiced initial fricatives which goes beyond the boundaries delimited by modern dialects and attests its appearance further to the north and east. Smith (1970) lists among other forms such as Vence (Essex); Verne, Vine’s Wood (Kent); Verleig, Vining (Sussex); Vernoart (Surrey); Vouchchurch, Vauld, Verne (Hereford), etc.

We have now attempted to show that the spelling evidence from Middle English and the Mod. E. onomastic evidence can help us to identify the area showing the voicing of /f/>v- and (with less material) also that of /s/>z- for the ME period. The more recent investigations (see Maps 5–7) have demonstrated beyond any doubt that the medial border of the voicing of /f/- and /s/- must be placed much more to the north than has so far been accepted.

What still remains to be considered in relation to questions raised earlier in the paper is the voicing of /θ/>// and of /ð/>// which are attested in Mod. English dialects but were not signalled by ME spelling.

As has been pointed out above the only available evidence for voicing of /θ/>// that provided by modern dialects. But modern dialects may only suggest this by giving some indication regarding the occurrence and distribution of /θ/. Map 1 shows that the present distribution of /v- θ- z-// is roughly the same. Because of this general similarity it has been assumed by most scholars that the voicing process affected all three fricatives to more or less the same extent in Middle English although there would be some differences of opinion as to the dating of /θ/>//. The voicing of all three fricatives, however, can be accepted only if it is treated as a phonetic process of weakening (lenition) affecting all spirants in the initial position (the fact that it does not look this way in Modern English and that some words exhibit the voicing whereas others do not is irrelevant since various analogical and other factors have operated over centuries, cf. fluctuation of forms /f-/~ /v-/, already in the 11th c. in some of the examples provided by Kristensson).

If this reasoning is accepted for /θ/, there is no ground to investigate the possibility of regarding the change /θ/>// as having operated by Early English times. After all there is evidence in Mod. E. dialects (see Map 3) and the distribution of forms, although more limited, still correlates in an interesting way with the voicing of the other three fricatives. Map 3, it is worth noting, has been based on rare lexical items, limited only to rural vocabulary, but on the following words of wide currency: she, shallow, shelf, shears, shear, shell, shirt, shoulder, shoe, shilling, shut and shy. The line dividing /θ/- and /ð/- more

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12 Sunday (1963) does not give any examples of /z/- in Worcestershire but assures the reader that his “material shows that it certainly occurred in this area. It may be assumed that /z/- was largely co-extensive with /v/- in ME. Onomastic material from other counties will perhaps bear out this assumption” (p. 267).

13 Line D in Map 4 is a cumulative isogloss relating both to v- and z-.

14 Private communication from 22nd April, 1982.
or less parallels the other instances of voicing at a certain, not too large, distance (see Map 4). As with /θ/ > /θ/ there is no early spelling evidence. Such comes only from the 16th century and later, but this is not surprising. Unlike the other three fricatives / s/ is not a 'primary' consonant; it simply derives from the combination [σ] which became a single palatal fricative between the end of the 9th century and the middle of the 10th century. (Flasdieck 1958: 382—3). Its voicing, thus, could only be after that date and voiced forms would not be likely to reach as far north as did those of the other three sounds. It would also be likely to affect, under the circumstances, fewer lexical items than the voicing of /θ/ = /θ/, there is then no convincing argument to prevent us from placing the change /θ/ -> /θ/ some time in the Middle English period. The fact that Smith mentions it in 1568 as a rural development (Horn-Lehnert 1954: 937) and that it is used in Restoration drama (where /θ/ = /θ/) to imitate dialect speakers, as in shriek for shriek (Bartholomew Fair 1614), zekke for zeeke (Preston's Cambises 1560), sall for sall (1635), sheepe for sheep (1635), shift for shift (1636), etc., together with the evidence from Modern English dialects, can only support the assumption made earlier by Horn and Lehnert (1954) and hinted at by Flasdieck (1958), Brunner (1960) and Winkel and Barry (1969) that the change /θ/ -> /θ/ had already taken place in Middle English. Also if we accept the voicing of all the initial fricatives as a unitary process, the conclusion automatically following from this is that /θ/ should undergo voicing initially if it existed at the time when the process was operating.

From what has been said in the present paper it is possible to draw the following conclusions:
1. the medieval distribution of the voiced forms was somewhat further to the north than hitherto accepted;
2. further research is necessary to establish more firmly and convincingly when the voicing occurred;
3. /θ/ -> /θ/ is a process which had already taken place in Middle English.

REFERENCES
