Systems collide: the *Trinity Homilies* B scribe and the evolution of the genitive noun inflection in early Middle English

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The early Middle English (eME) period (1150-1350) saw great changes to the forms of the inflected genitive noun. The B scribe of the *Trinity Homilies*, a twelfth-century East Midland text, is an invaluable source of information on these changes; not only does he provide evidence of the changes as these were occurring, but his usage also highlights the fact that there were two quite different noun systems at work in England, with important effects for the development of the singular and plural genitive noun phrases. One system was that inherited from Old English (OE), as this system had evolved in eME; the other was an innovative system which had developed in the North. This paper will examine the endings which the B scribe used for the singular and plural, and the factors which affected his choice of ending: phonological and analogical pressures affecting the inherited Old English system, as well as emerging early Middle English systems.

In the singular, one ending type, *-es*, which is directly descended from an OE singular genitive ending, accounts for more than 80% of all the singular genitive nouns, and the data shows that the B scribe is extending this ending to nouns which historically did not have *-es*. The scribe's inflected plural genitive nouns, in contrast, show a greater amount of variation between a larger number of ending types, with no single ending type being dominant. Instead there are two competing principal inflectional endings, one descended from OE (*–ene*) and the other (*–es*) originating in the novel noun system from the North. While the ultimate results in the singular and plural genitive inflection were different, these results were due to the same major changes — phonological reduction in the OE endings, the influence of the Northern system, and analogical extension of the certain endings.

References

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