

On the Interchangeability of *on* and *of* in the *Peterborough Chronicle* from 1070 to 1154

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1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to examine the interchangeability of the preposition *of* in the “definition” sense – “indicating virtually a sense-apposition between two nouns” (Mustanoja 1960: 81) – with *on* in the *Peterborough Chronicle*,¹ and then to describe the decline of *on* and the concomitant encroachment of *of* upon *on* in the “definition” sense through three subsets of the *Chronicle*.

The *Peterborough Chronicle*, known as manuscript E, makes up part of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Among the other manuscripts, the *Peterborough Chronicle* is worthy of particular attention, since the earlier annals maintain a significant number of characteristics of canonical Late Old English, and the later ones exhibit the emerging features of Early Middle English. According to Clark (1970: xxxvii), the *Peterborough Chronicle* was written at intervals between 1121 and 1155, at Peterborough. She also states that “[p]alaeographically, the text of the *Chronicle* falls into three sections”: the annals from 1070 up to 1121, those from 1122 to 1131, and the last from 1132 to 1154, which are called the Copied Annals, the First Continuation, and the Final Continuation, respectively.

Only a few comments and observations are made in studies of the *Chronicle* on the interchangeability of the prepositions and their

¹ MS. Laud Misc. 636

diachronic change (Belden 1897; Bødtker 1908; Mustanoja 1960; Mitchell 1985). To the best of my knowledge, little quantitative research has hitherto been done, and so this paper will attempt to fill the gap in the literature. However, it will do so by narrowing down the scope of research to the prepositions *of*, *on* and *de*. I hope to be able to answer the following questions:

1. In what way did the prepositions *of* and *on* overlap in meaning or usage?
2. What diachronic change did they undergo from the Copied Annals through the First Continuation to the Final Continuation?

2. Previous Studies

It has been observed that the two prepositions *on* and *of* shared some usages in Late Old and Early Middle English. Bødtker (1908: 23) states:

In the later portions of the [Anglo-Saxon] Chronicle *cyng*, *papa* nearly always take *of*, generally also *eorl*. With *biscop*, *abbot*, and the like, *of* more frquently interchanges with *on* (or *in*, *æt*): *abbot on Abbandune*, *abbot of Abbandune*.

Later on, Mustanoja (1960: 400–1) noted that “[*o*]n is not infrequently used in cases where a modern reader would expect to find some other preposition, like *of* (denoting separation, partitivity, etc.).”² More importantly, he points out:

² Mustanoja (1960: 401) adds a footnote that “[i]t is not absolutely sure, however, that the letter corrected was n.” For editors of Old English manuscripts, the letter “n” followed by “o” seems to have been so confusing in appearance that some chose to emend it as *of* and others as *on*. Mitchell (1985: 510–11) notes that “[s]ome earlier editions of Sweet’s Reader [...] emended *on* to *of* in Dream 138 [...]”

The interchangeability of *of*, *on*, and *at* is not uncommon in ME and is also found in later OE. Towards the end of the ME period it becomes quite common. It is usually *of* that encroaches upon the other two. There are OE instances like *þa burg æt Tofeceastre* (OE Chron. An. 921), *se burch on Gleaweceastre* (an. 1122), and *se burh of Lincolne* (an. 1123). This use of *of* may account for – or at least may have promoted – the use of the *of*-periphrasis for the genitive of definition with place-names (Mustanoja 1960: 350).

Along the lines of the above-mentioned remarks, this paper will investigate the two questions raised in the Introduction.

3. Materials

A total of 640 examples of *on* and 413 of *of* have been collected from the edition prepared by Clark (1970), which this paper employs as the corpus. The result, divided into three, is shown in Table 1. The collected phrases with *on* and *of* (henceforth *on*-phrases and *of*-phrases, respectively) are analysed in the following sections.

Table 1. Raw frequencies of the prepositions *on* and *of*³

	Copied Annals (1070–1121)	First Continuation (1122–1131)	Final Continuation (1132–1154)
<i>on</i>	476 (32.6)	134 (29.1)	30 (11.5)
<i>of</i>	204 (14.0)	161 (35.0)	48 (18.4)

³ The number in brackets in Table 1 indicates the relative frequencies per 1,000 words.

4. West Saxon *on* with Respect to *in*

Before going into the analysis proper, it is necessary to deal with the preposition *in*, as the West Saxon dialect – from which what Clark (1960) calls West Saxon *Schriftsprache*, or standard literary Old English, evolved – supplanted *in* with *on*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforward *OED*), the entry *in*, *prep.* states:

In Old English [...] the preposition *in* was displaced by the preposition *on* ([...]), so that in classical and late West Saxon, and to some extent in other Old English dialects, *on* was used for both *on* and *in*, an emphatic or distinctive sense of ‘in’ being however expressed by *innan*. [...] In Anglian, especially in the north and west, *in* remained (though, under West Saxon influence, often displaced by *on* in documents); and in Middle English the distinction of *in* and *on* was gradually restored, though many traces of their former blending still remain.

In order to examine how widely *in* is used in the *Peterborough Chronicle*, I have counted the occurrences of *in*, *innan* and *innon* (the latter two are emphatic forms of *in*).

Table 2. Raw frequencies of *in*, *innan* and *innon* in contrast to *on*

	Copied Annals	First Continuation	Final Continuation
<i>in</i>	4	8	30
<i>innan</i> , <i>innon</i>	47	2	0
<i>on</i>	476	134	30

The results in Table 2 demonstrate the overwhelming use of *on* over *in*, *innan* and *innon* in the Copied Annals. The table also shows that the use of *on* still prevails over the others in the First Continuation. It is not until the Final Continuation that *in* has reemerged (up to a point). It can, therefore, be argued that *on* is as predominant in the first two parts of the *Peterborough Chronicle* as in the canonical West Saxon texts. This, in turn, means that it suffices to discuss *on* with respect to *of*, setting aside the issue of *in*.

5. Interchangeability of *on* and *of*

There are a number of *on*-phrases adjoined to place names in which the preposition no longer maintains a purely local meaning, but behaves more like *of* as “the genitive of definition” (Mustanoja 1960: 81). By way of illustration, (1a) shows this usage of the *on*-phrase; *of*-phrase in (1b) shows the same usage as *on*-phrase in (1a).

(1) a. On þisum geare forðferde Swægn cyng **on Dænmercan**, 7
Harold his sunu feng to þe kynerice.

“In this year Swein, king of Denmark, died, and Harold, his son, succeeded to the realm.” (1076, ll.1–2)

b. Cnut kyng **of Denmearcan**, Swægnes sune cynges, fundade
hiderward 7 wolde gewinnan þis land mid Rodbeardes eorles
fultume of Flandran ...

“Cnut, king of Denmark, son of King Swein, was setting out in this direction and meant to conquer this country with the help of Robert, count of Flanders ...” (1085, ll.2–4)

At first sight, *on* in (1a) might seem to have a spatial meaning: i.e. that it was in Denmark where the king died. However, if I build upon previous scholars' views, it can be said that a more appropriate reading is that this *on*-phrase modifies the preceding nominal, *Swægn cyng*, as a way to define his social status. Nor is it possible to think of the *on*-phrase in (1a) as having a purely spatial meaning, since there is a source saying that Sweyn Forkbeard was thought to have died in London – *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, written by William of Jumièges, supposedly between 1050 and 1070, records: “Swein was struck by a sudden illness and died while dealing with the kingdom’s affairs at London” according to *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (PASE). The *on*-phrase in (1a), therefore, can be compared with the *of*-phrase in (1b), in that both serve in defining the subject’s status.

Other comparable sets of examples of *on* and *of* are shown in (2a–b) and (3a–b). The examples in each set resemble each other in their usages, in a similar fashion to the previous instances.

(2) a. Ðises geares forðferdon Mauricius biscop **on Lunden** 7 ...

“In the course of this year died Maurice, bishop of London, ...”

(1107, l.16)

b. Ða ferde se ærcebiscop sone þæræfter to Cantwarabyrig ... 7
was þære sone fram se biscop **of Lundene** ...

“Then the archbishop soon after that went to Canterbury ... and was there forthwith consecrated to bishop by the bishop of London ...” (1123, ll.44–47)

- (3) a. Ernulf, þe ær wæs prior on Cantwarbyrig, feng to þam abbodrice **on Burch**.

“Ernulf, who had been prior at Canterbury, succeeded to the abbacy of Peterborough.” (1107, ll.10–11)

- b. Ðes ilce gæres he gæf þone abbotrice **of Burch** an abbot, Heanri wæs Henry was gehaten, of Peitowe ...

“In the course of this same year King Henry gave the abbacy of Peterborough to an abbot called Henry of Poitou ...” (1127, ll.22–23)

Although they are much fewer in frequency, *de*-phrases also function just like *on*- and *of*-phrases. Since Norman French had a huge influence on Anglo-Saxons after the Norman Conquest in 1066, the chroniclers seem to have used *de*, the French equivalent to *of*, when referring to people in France, as can be seen in (4a–b).

- (4) a. And þa toforan Cristesmessan com Rotbert **de Bælesme** hider to lande to þam cyng

“And then before Christmas Robert of Bellême came into this country to the king.” (1105, ll.11–12)

- b. Enmang þis was his nefe cumen to Engleland, Stephne **de Blais**; 7 com to Lundene;

“Meanwhile his nephew, Stephen of Blois, had come to England and went to London.” (1135, ll.13–15)

The use of the *de*-phrase is observed only in cases which mention place-names in France: Bellême, Blois, Briouze, Estouteville,

Reviere, Roumare and Walterville.

6. Diachronic Change from *on* to *of*

The focal point of this article is to track the rise and fall of *on* and *of* with the “definition” usage. The entire corpus has been searched for *on*-, *of*- and *de*-phrases which are considered to display this usage. Table 3 shows their frequencies for each sub-text.

Table 3: Raw frequencies of *on*, *of* and *de* with the “definition” sense

	Copied Annals	First Continuation	Final Continuation
<i>on</i>	34	7	0
<i>of</i>	108	121	22
<i>de</i>	12	0	4

It is apparent that the use of *of* is predominant throughout all the texts. By contrast, *on* in the “definition” sense occurs one-third as often as *of* in the Copied Annals. Its frequency then decreased to about one-fifth in the First Continuation, and then it finally ceased to appear in the Final Continuation. As for *de*, its occurrences seem to be sporadic compared with the others, which may have a bearing on the stylistic preference of the individual scribes. A bar chart in Figure 1 makes it clear that *on* steadily declined, while *of* simultaneously grew in frequency.

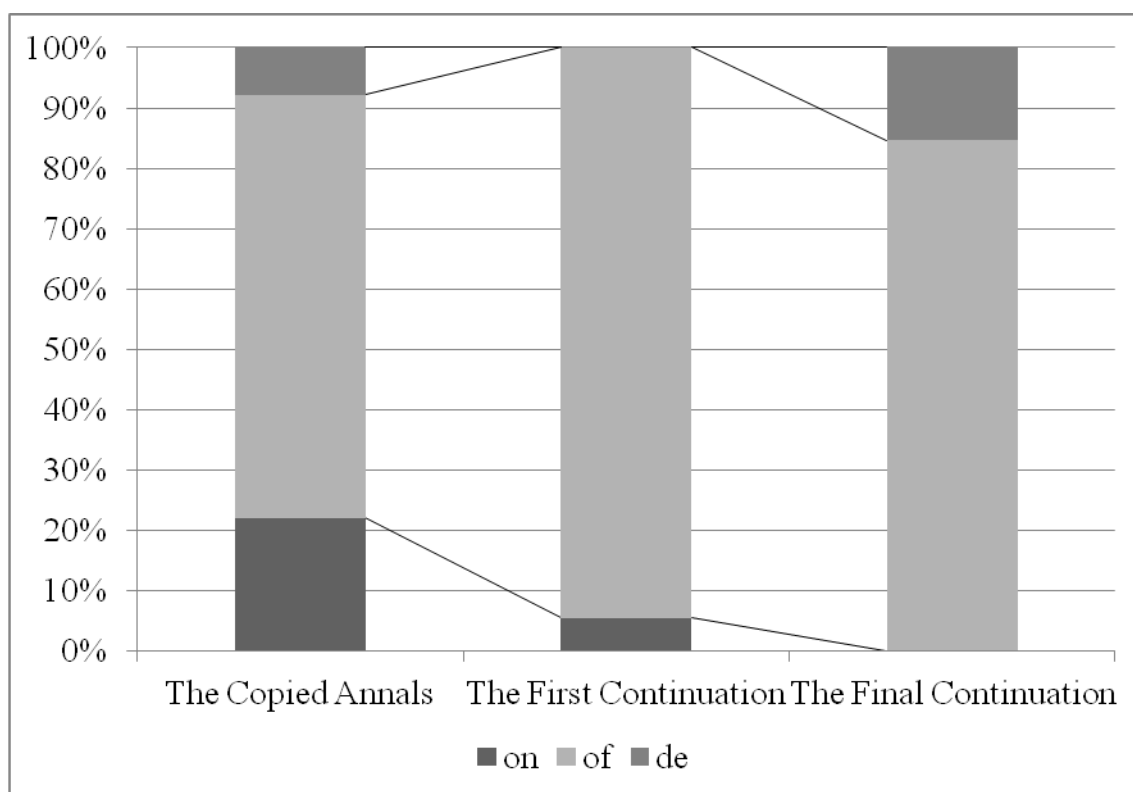


Figure 1. Proportions of *on*, *of* and *de* with the “definition” sense

7. Discussion and Conclusion

All in all, it is evident that *on* in the “definition” sense had fallen into disuse by the time of the Final Continuation. It can also be argued that the decline of *on* had to do with the concomitant growth of *of*, owing to their interchangeability. In other words, *on* in the “definition” sense lost out to *of* in direct competition.

Still, I have left open the question why this change occurred. A view of functional load arguably cannot explain it, as *of*-periphrastic constructions seem to have become loaded with a much greater number of functions than *on* once had. It might have something to do with the language-internal competition among prepositions in terms of their semantics and function, which will be addressed in future

work.

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