

## **What the fuss is all about... some basics of the Cornish reconstruction debate**

### **1. Prosody**

Much of the debate between Cornish linguists centers on **prosody** (i.e. those features of pronunciation which are normally not explicitly noted in writing, like stress, intonation, length, breaks and so on – one could sum it up as the rhythm and melody of a language). A central concept in this respect is the so-called **Prosodic Shift** which Nicholas Williams postulated for early Middle Cornish: he claims that before the earliest Middle Cornish texts were written, Cornish exchanged its inherited Celtic rhythm for an English one. Ken George disputes this; in his earlier works he claimed that this change did take place, but not before ca. 1600. He has recently adapted his theory and now claims that it did not happen at all, and that the rhythm and melody heard in traditional Cornish English pronunciation of Cornish place-name does not represent how Late Cornish sounded. What this new twist to his theory does not explain well is why, from 1600 on, so many vowels which had been (half-)long originally are marked as short in the texts. Such massive change in spelling at least raises the suspicion that the original rhythm of the language did in fact change.

As is immediately apparent from my definition of prosody, this is a tricky subject because prosody can mostly be deduced only indirectly from written texts! It is therefore no wonder that the debate has been raging on for fourteen years, with no side being able to convince the other. I will now go into further detail and explain what exactly the differences in the two reconstructions are, and – more importantly – how they sound.

#### **1.1 The accent: Volume, pitch, and length**

Before we continue, we will have to cover the subject of the **accent**. There are three features which an accented syllable can have: volume (**stress**), pitch (**tone accent**), and length (**quantity**). In English, all three features coalesce, and an accent-bearing syllable is louder and higher than its neighbours; if it contains a long vowel, it is also longer. (It should be said that many present-day English dialects no longer have long vowels at all, and their speakers mistake differences in vowel quality for differences in vowel length.) Other languages may have completely different systems: in Japanese for example, the last syllable in a group bearing high pitch is considered the accented one.

It is not entirely clear how things were in Cornish, and even worse, they may well have changed considerably over time. Its sister language, Welsh, has stress and length on the **penultimate** (=second-last) syllable, but the highest tone on the **ultimate** (=last) one. Breton on the other hand has all three features coalesce on the penultimate syllable, and Cornish English certainly does the same with Cornish names and dialect words. Up till now, spoken Revived Cornish has largely followed the English model, but it is by no means certain that this is also what the traditional language sounded like – Middle Cornish, at least, may well have sounded more like Welsh. Only two out of the three accentual features are clear: the second-last syllable in a word was normally the loudest (i.e. it was stressed) and, at the very least until the time of the *Ordinalia*, it was also the longest one. We have no idea if it also carried the highest pitch.

## 1. 2 Syllable length

I have already mentioned the most important principle concerning syllable length: in the inherited Cornish system, stressed syllables were always longer than unstressed ones. Unlike English, this principle also applied if the vowel in the stressed syllable was short – in which case the following consonant was long. The net result of such a system (which is shared by many languages, Celtic and otherwise) is a very characteristic rhythm with speakers dwelling audibly longer on louder “beats”. To get an idea of what the result sounds like, listen to the way that native speakers of Welsh speak English! Or simply click on the link below to have a Cornish sample text read out in an approximation of classical Middle Cornish. You may find some of the vowel sounds different from the usual present-day learners’ pronunciation; ignore them for the time being and concentrate on the length of vowels and consonants.

👉 [Sample text: from ‘Tir ha Taves’, by Tony Snell](#)

Awel wyls a helgh kommel,  
hwibana dre Ven-an-Toll,  
dehesi dornas grow sygh  
a-dhiwar leur an grommlegh,  
herdhya tonnow goodh a garth  
trethow enyal a-gledhbarth.

Did you hear it? All stressed syllables are pronounced in one of the following ways:

- They contain a long vowel; e.g. awel = A-A-w-e-l; sygh = S-Y-Y-GH.
- They contain a long consonant after the stressed vowel; e.g. kommel = K-O-M-m-o-l.
- They contain a group of consonants after the stressed vowel; e.g. garth = G-A-R-TH.

A very positive offshoot of this is that the length of a vowel can be deduced from the length of the consonant it precedes. Originally, **p**, **t**, **k**, and **m** were always long (and could only be preceded by short vowels); **l**, **n**, and **r** could be either short or long; all other consonants were normally short (thus preceded by a long vowel). There is an apparent exception in comparatives, superlatives and subjunctives: while **sygh**, ‘dry’ was pronounced S-Y-Y-GH, **sygha**, ‘drier’, was S-Y-GH-gh-a. This happens because the suffix (= added final syllable) actually starts with a ‘h’-sound which is not normally written. The spelling <sygha> stands for actual sygh-ha; here, the stressed vowel is followed by a group of consonants, namely GH-H. In fluent speech, this meant that while the vowel was short, the two consonants merged and came out as long GH-GH. The same holds true for cases like **koth**, ‘old’ > **kothha**, ‘older’ (TH-H which was pronounced as long TH-TH), **krev**, ‘strong’ > **kreffa**, ‘stronger’ (V-H → F-F) etc. This lengthened and hardened pronunciation of the consonant can be seen in the texts up to Tregear’s Homilies in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. It may have persisted even longer although Nicholas Williams argues that it came to be replaced by simple devoicing without lengthening.

### 1.2.1 What is ‘half-length’ and where does it come into this?

Many learners fell confused by the frequent use of the terms ‘half-length’ and ‘half-long vowels’. What are they, and were are they supposed to be pronounced according to the

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recommended phonology of KK? (Other systems do not feature half-length.)

In a nutshell, half-length is what happens to a long vowel which stands in a non-final syllable. It becomes shortened a tiny bit as the speaker hurries towards the end of the word. Native speakers of languages where this occurs (such as Breton) do normally not perceive a clear difference between long and half-long vowels but hear both as long. Most linguists believe that in Late Cornish, originally half-long vowels had become short. This is based on a marked change in spelling: in many cases, the LC scribes wrote double consonants after originally half-long vowels, indicating that they heard them as short.

Here is a recording of long, half-long, and short vowels. See if you can discern them without looking at the transcript below!

☞ [Some long, half-long, and short vowels for comparison](#)

lev - levow - poslev

glin - glinyow - dewlin

mil - miles - euthvil

How did the stressed vowels in **levow**, **glinyow**, **miles** sound to you? Long or short? Did you hear the difference in duration between them and those in the monosyllabic words? In spoken Revived Cornish, almost nobody ever uses half-length in <a>, <e>, <y>, or <o> but pronounces short vowels instead. The speech of some KK users tends to feature half-long <i> because they have (wrongly) been taught that “<i> is always long and <y> is always short”, which is not the case – see under 1.3. Shortening originally half-long vowels in speech is perfectly justified in RLC or Tudor Cornish – so if you are a user of UCR or RLC you will have no problems here - but it clashes with the recommended phonology of KK.

So much for the inherited system in Cornish and its sister languages. Of course, the language came under ever increasing influence of English, especially when a large part of the population became bilingual. According to historical sources, the bulk of this development would have centred on the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the Reformation as a decisive turning point. English words had been borrowed by Cornish speakers before, but now many of them were no longer assimilated to the Cornish system; instead, they were pronounced as in the English of the time. This meant that words like **best**, ‘beast’ (B-EH-EH-S-T) became part of the language, so that all of a sudden you could have long vowels followed by certain groups of consonants. Even inherited words became influenced by this, and by 1700 Edward Lhuyd marks the vowel as long in words like **pysk** (or **pesk**), ‘fish’ or **lost**, ‘tail’. As a rule, vowels became long before **st**, and often before **sk** and **sp** as well.

To make matters worse, some originally English (or French) words had a long vowel before **p**, **t**, **k** or **m**. As you will remember, these consonants were originally long and vowels preceding them were therefore short. But now words like **kota**, ‘coat’, K-OH-OH-t-a, or **dama**, ‘dame; mother’, D-AH-AH-m-a became part of the Cornish vocabulary. In these, the **t** and **m** were seen as belonging to the beginning of the following syllable, not the ending of the stressed one, which could not have been the case before. The language had to adapt to accommodate – and this is where Williams’ and George’s theories differ a whole lot.

### 1.3 Possible changes to the Middle Cornish system

There are basically two possible ways to describe what happened to the length rules in Cornish when more and more unassimilated English loan-words were borrowed. Since we have no native speakers to interview, both are possible – the choice should therefore be made according to how easily and how well they explain the evidence.

a) **Ken George's theory:** all consonants could now be long or short, and vowel length still depended on it; basically an extension of the inherited system.

In order for this to work, there now have to be short and long versions of practically all consonants: **p, t, k**, and **m** are short in some loanwords; **b, d, g, th, gh, f v**, and **s** may now be long. In essence, the idea is that people would have memorized how long every consonant was and deduced the length of the preceding vowel from it. This complicates the original system (where only the length of **l, n**, and **r** matter) considerably, giving rise to the question of whether it could really have happened that way – even more so since such a change would have moved Cornish pronunciation further away from English, the language which triggered the shift in the first place.

One important implication of this is that, in Kernewek Kemmyn, vowel length is never marked on the vowel itself. Many learners seem to have misunderstood this, and one sometimes hears statements like “In KK, <i> is long and <y> is short.” This is not correct. Both vowels can be long or short, depending on the number of consonants following them. The difference is not in length but in quality, in this case in the position of the tongue while articulating them. <i> is the sound in English “she” (albeit sometimes short, which never happens in English), while <y> is the sound in the South-Eastern pronunciation of “beer”, where the **r** is dropped completely. In most English dialects however, the sound corresponding to <i> is always heard as long, while the sound corresponding to <y> is always heard as short, which is the reason for the confusion amongst learners.

👉 [Listen to the recommended pronunciation of KK \*\*mis, dydh, liver, and lyver.\*\*](#)

As you can hear, this differs markedly from what one very often hears from learners who are likely to mistakenly say “meez”, “dyddh”, “leever”, and “lyvver”.

b) **Nicholas Williams' theory:** people no longer memorized how long consonants were but how long vowels were, as they did in English.

This version turns the original system on its head: people would have memorized that in some loan-words, vowels could be irregularly long and then, by extension, have started to memorize vowel length (instead of the length of **l, n**, and **r**) in Cornish words as well. This is the basis for Williams' theory of the **Prosodic Shift**: in essence, it says that the way in which the length of sounds in Cornish was organized got remodelled after the pattern of English. This system is much simpler than the one presented under point a), but it has a decisive weakness: it postulates that not only did consonants lose their length distinction, but also that vowels in non-final syllables became short by default. Or, to put it another way, long vowels could only appear in a) words of one syllable or b) in stressed final syllables. In all other positions, vowels would become short. The trouble with this is that there would have been no way for speakers to remember where Middle Cornish had had long **ll, rr**, or **nn**. However, Late Cornish sources show that the distinction was upheld – most noticeably because in Late Cornish texts, we find <dn> where earlier stages of the

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language had long N-N, but not where they had short N. The same holds true for <bm>, which we find instead of original M-M, but not M – we never find spellings like \***dabma**, for example. The distinction cannot have been lost completely. It is therefore necessary to assume that not only did people have to memorize which vowels were long, but they also had to memorize which **m**, **n**, **l**, or **r** were. Williams also claims that this happened only in the western part of the Cornish speaking area, while eastern dialects lost consonant length altogether. The result is not really less complicated than model (a), although it is presumably easier for most English speakers to imagine a system built on long and short vowels than it is to imagine one built on long and short consonants.

If one accepts the premise that it is the length of vowels, not consonants, that matters most, it is only logical to mark vowel length on the vowel itself; hence the use of accent marks in KS, where <ê> marks an unexpectedly long e and <è> an unexpectedly short one. The term “unexpectedly” is very interesting here: it means that in inherited words, vowel length *can* be deduced from the nature and number of the following consonant(s), so there is in fact unanimity as far as the original system is concerned. The quarrel is about how exactly the language adapted to English influence.

### 1. 3. 1 The Prosodic Shift

As I have explained above, Nicholas Williams summarizes the developments in Cornish pronunciation which – according to his theory – resulted from the switch to a more English prosody under the term **Prosodic Shift** (PS). This is a whole bundle of changes in pronunciation because first the length rules would have changed and then, as a consequence, the quality of newly shortened vowels would have done so as well.

👉 [Now listen to a post-PS version of Tony Snell's poem](#)

What differences apart from shortened vowel can you identify between this version and the one above? Which one sounds more like the way present day learners speak Cornish?

As the Prosodic Shift brings Cornish closer to English prosody, it is only natural that the resulting pronunciation sounds similar to that of native speakers of English. In *Cornish Today*, Williams argues that it happened as the result of English speakers having to learn Cornish after the Norman conquest. This claim is being disputed by almost everybody else. KK stalwarts have even accused Nicholas Williams of constructing his theory of traditional pronunciation expressly in a way that would make today's learners feel comfortable about their Anglicised mispronunciation. Which is of course more polemical than anything else, but shows that in the KK camp, there is a certain degree of discontent with the way revived Cornish is pronounced by most of its speakers. We can observe a clash between two radically different ideological approaches: should the revived language be made as easy to pronounce as possible to 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglophones, or should it be made to sound as un-English as possible? Both sides claim that they are only interested in the historical truth, but as all existing theories are based largely on conjecture, these basic ideologies are allowed to interfere a lot with pure historical linguistics.

### 1. 4 Changes in Late Cornish

As has been mentioned above, the extant Late Cornish texts show that further changes

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had happened to the length rules. The most obvious point is that long m and n ceased to exist as they were replaced with **bm** and **dn**. This development in pronunciation is called **pre-occlusion**, and it is by no means restricted to Cornish. In fact, it can be observed in a number of languages all over the North Western Atlantic area of Europe, from Northern Sámi in Norway to Icelandic, and from Cornish and Manx to Faroese. In linguistic terms, pre-occlusion is referred to as an **areal feature** because it is shared by a number of languages spoken in a region. Areal features are quite common as it is normal for neighbouring languages to influence one another. In all cases, pre-occlusion either happened within a Germanic language, or in a language which originally had long **mm** and **nn** and was (or still is) in close linguistic contact with a Germanic one.

### 1.4.1 Pre-occlusion of earlier long mm and nn

How did pre-occlusion develop? Everybody seems to agree that this happened as a result of Cornish pronunciation drawing closer to that of English. This may seem strange at first glance, since the English sound repertory does not feature **bm** and **dn**. Things are not so straightforward, however, and the general idea is that these new sounds developed when Cornish speakers, already accustomed to speaking English a lot, started to mix the two prosodic systems. Since English at that point no longer had long mm and nn, people probably first got sloppy about them in Cornish, then tended to overpronounce them as if they were two separate sounds: [mʔm] and [nʔn] (m-stop-m and n-stop-n respectively). From there, it is only a very small step to [bm] and [dn]. The following recording shows this development.

👉 [Listen to how the words tamm and penn may have turned into tabm and pedn.](#)

If you are coming from any of the MC based orthographies, you may be wondering where exactly this occurred. After all, UC and UCR write **pen**, **pennow**, **penygow** (which become **pedn**, **pedno**, **penigo** in RLC) whereas KK writes **penn**, **pennow**, **pennigow**. Neither UC/R nor KK indicate directly where Late Cornish developed **dn**. Incidentally the SWF writes **penn**, **pennow**, **penigow** because it tries to restrict double consonant spellings to where long consonants were originally present in pronunciation. This is the reason for the frequent alternation between **l**, **m**, **n**, **r** and **ll**, **mm**, **nn**, **rr** in the SWF.

Neither UC/R nor KK reflect the actual pronunciation directly. There are rules to predict pre-occlusion from KK, but not from UC/R. KS on the other hand states that pre-occlusion is unpredictable and therefore introduces a diacritic to mark short vowels preceding unpreoccluded Late Cornish n.

But was it really unpredictable? The answer is: in over 99% of cases, no. Apart from a tiny number of scantily attested LC words, mm became bm and nn became dn where they were originally pronounced long. This includes a number of special cases. Let's state the rules:

- Long **mm** and **nn** could only occur after stressed short vowels, as could their reflexes bm and dn. Speakers of conservative Middle Cornish said **pennow**, P-E-N-n-o-w, but **penigow**, p-e-n-I-G-o-w.
- In some words like **penn-glin**, LC **pedn-glin**, 'knee', both syllables were stressed. Words of this type are called **loose compounds** (see *Nebes Geryow a-dro dhe Gernewek 02*) and can usually be identified by the hyphen between their components. The first component bore **secondary** (=weak) and the second **primary** (=strong) **stress**, and both stressed syllables were long.
- When followed by another consonant within the same word, long consonants were usually shortened in speech, and as a consequence, **bm** and **dn** did not occur, e.g. **kamm+bronn** > **Cambron**, not \***Cabmbron**.
- When short n at the end of a stressed syllable was followed by a [j]-sound (spelt <y> in UC/R and KK), it became long, and the vowel preceding it became short; e.g. Engl. **bargain** > MC **bargynya** > **bargynnya** > LC **bargydnya**.
- As I have stated, there is a small amount of words in which pre-occlusion is expected, but not attested. In all of these cases we cannot know if it is our sources that are lacking or if they really had unexpected short consonants following short

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vowels. The KS draft mentions KS **jyn**, engine, as one such case, yet it is only attested in *Creacion of the Worlde*, a text in which pre-occlusion is not regularly marked in writing. The evidence seems somewhat sparse to decide how it was really pronounced in Late Cornish. On the other hand it may simply have been treated like an English word, not a Cornish one, as by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, almost all Cornish speakers were bilingual. A Late Cornish form **jyn** without pre-occlusion is entirely possible, but LC attestations are generally so sparse that we cannot know for sure what happened to some individual words. This leads to a major difference in approaches between RLC and KS on one side and the SWF and KK on the other. RLC and KS are not happy about applying known rules for sound-changes to words which are only attested in earlier forms of the language and often prefer to stick to these older attestations, even though the result may in cases be anachronistic (**conservative approach**). The SWF and KK default to treating such badly attested cases as regular developments unless attestations show that they behaved irregularly, although that means working with some forms which were never spelt this way by the scribes (**reconstructionist approach**). Both sides have been known to accuse each other of conlanging (i.e. constructing parts of the language at whim) over this issue.

Pre-occlusion meant that Late Cornish no longer distinguished between short and long versions of **m** and **n** because the long variants had turned into something different. But what happened to long **rr** and **ll**? Edward Lhuyd, the only Celtic linguist who heard traditional Cornish spoken, makes no mention of a length distinction in these cases (but on the other hand he mentions that he heard word-initial **r** pronounced as “**rh**”, presumably as in the Welsh name Rhys). We have to rely on evidence from other sources and, admittedly, a bit of conjecture here.

Let's cover **r** first. It has been pointed out by Ken George that as soon as 1504, when Beunans Meriasek was written, long and short **r** were no longer reliably distinguished in writing although **l** and **n** still were. This could well mean that by that time, the inherited pronunciation of **r** had been replaced by something new. But what? Gendall suspects that between vowels, it was realised as a **flap** (=one weak stroke with the tip of the tongue), and there is some circumstantial evidence to back this up: during the transition from Middle to Late Cornish, voiced **s** became **r** between vowels in words like MC **gasa** > LC **gara** or MC **esa** > LC **era**.

👉 [Listen to MC gasa > LC gara, MC esa > LC era.](#)

This sound change - referred to as **rhotacism** - can be observed in various other languages as well, most notably Latin where it gave rise to alternations like **os** (nom.) - **oris** (gen.), 'mouth' (< originally **os**, **osis**, but the voiced **s** sound had turned into **r** between vowels). The new **r** sound produced by process produces is indeed a flap. As for other positions within the word, I have already mentioned Lhuyd's description of initial “**rh**”. We can also find what looks like the written representation of this sound in comparatives, superlatives, and subjunctives, where it seems to appear after the stressed vowel. As you remember, what we are dealing with in these forms is an unwritten 'h' sound at the beginning of the suffix. In Late Cornish, it came to be written: MC **hirra**, 'longer' > LC **hirha**. As regards other positions, we simply do not know the exact pronunciation. It could have been the typical retroflex sound of Cornish English dialect, a flap or something



else entirely. What matters as far as the length rules are concerned is that the inherited distribution of **r** and **rr** apparently got abandoned around the time Beunans Meryasek was written (1504) and that the original pronunciation of the long version, probably a long trilled, 'Spanish style' sound, may already have sounded archaic to Cornish speakers in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Fortunately it does not matter much which exact shade of pronunciation you give your **r** in Cornish - you will be understood in any case, and as you have seen, there may have been different, equally 'correct' realisations in the traditional language. As long as you do not drop it after vowels - South Eastern English style - you should be fine.

The case of **l** on the other hand is quite different. Richard Gendall has collected traditional pronunciation of traditional placenames and has found that original **ll** between vowels was still pronounced long in West Penwith Anglo-Cornish in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; e.g. Scilly as S-I-L-l-y. Such a pronunciation cannot well be English in origin, and we must therefore acknowledge the possibility that long **ll** was retained in Late Cornish until the very end. In comparatives, superlatives, and subjunctives, it seems to have alternated in pronunciation with **lh**, c.f. LC spellings like **pelha**, further. This **lh** sound was apparently not pronounced like Welsh **ll**, because contemporary authors describe it as "a kind of reflecting of the tongue", whatever that means. In any case, it was still markedly distinct from short **l**.

## 2. The Vowels

### 2.1. What is Vocalic Alternation?

On a basic level, Vocalic Alternation (VA) is a written alternation between <y> and <e> which we find in a number of texts from the mid to late Middle Cornish period. A certain group of words which have either <i>, <y>, <ey>, or <ei> as the stressed vowel in their **monosyllabic** (=single syllable) forms tend to show <e> in forms of more than one syllable, e.g. **dydh**, day, but **dedhyow**, days. An additional complication is that in both earlier (e.g. the oldest parts of the Ordinalia) and later (Beunans Meryasek and all of Late Cornish) texts, VA does not appear. Older texts mostly write <dydh, dydhyow>, and Late Cornish texts have <dedh, dedhyow> (or rather <dyth> and <deth> respectively because the scribes did not distinguish between **dh** and **th**). Which has triggered further debate about what VA actually was, what caused it in the first place etc. etc.

Ken George thinks that both the <y> and the <e> in these words actually represent the same vowel (/ɪ/, which as you remember is the vowel in the south-eastern English pronunciation of "beer"). His explanation is that the Cornish scribes relied on Middle English orthography which did not have a letter for this long vowel, so they took the one representing the closest approximation in the Middle English sound repertory, /e/. Here lies a serious problem with this explanation: how are we to know that the sound in question was not actually /e/ anyway? Lhuyd's transcriptions show that, by the time of Late Cornish, this vowel was indeed /e/ and no longer /ɪ/. When did it change in Cornish? If we look at the texts, we see that while Resurrexio Domini mainly writes <y> for KK /ɪ/, other parts of the Ordinalia already mainly write <ey, y, ei> in words of one syllable and <e> in longer words. This would make it seem possible that the lowering of

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this vowel began as early as ca. 1400, and that VA is the result of a Middle English inspired way of writing long [e:] mixed with a residue of the older habit of writing <y>.

Nicholas Williams on the other hand says that there must have been a difference in pronunciation, too, and has offered two possible explanation. The first explanations links Cornish VA to a similar phenomenon in Welsh, where it is not written but certainly pronounced. Welsh VA goes back to what is called the **accent shift**, a development which took place in all Brythonic languages except for one Breton dialect, ca. 1100. Before this point, words were normally stressed on the last syllable, and vowels in unstressed syllables lost some of their colouring. When the accent moved to the second-last syllable, the newly stressed vowels were given new colouring which did not always correspond to the original pronunciation. Thus, according to this theory, in words of more than one syllable, original /ɪ/ would have become /e/ whereas it never became weakened and strengthened again in words of only one syllable and therefore remained stable. This explanation has one major flaw: in the Old Cornish Vocabulary, the words which should be affected do not show the expected weakening of the vowel in the second-last syllable. Instead, we find spellings like *lither*, 'letter'.

The second explanation offered is that in <dyth, deyth, deith> the vowel was long, but that in <dethyow> it had become short, and that its quality had changed when it was shortened. As we have said, Nicholas Williams' theory places the so-called **Prosodic Shift** at a time before the earliest Middle Cornish texts were written. After that time, vowels in second-last syllables would have become short. The question is, if VA is the result of such an old change, why don't we see it in *Resurrexio Domini*?