

Vowels

For Old English of the eighth-ninth centuries, we can assume for all dialects this minimal or 'core' **vowel system**:

| Short Monophthongs | | Diphthongs | Long Monophthongs | | Diphthongs |
|--------------------|-----|------------|-------------------|------|------------|
| i | y | | i: | y: | |
| e | (ø) | eo | e: | (ø:) | e:o |
| æ | ɑ | æɑ | æ: | ɑ: | æ:ɑ |
| u | | | u: | | |
| o | | | o: | | |

features worth noting:

1. phonetic as well as phonological symmetry throughout the long and short systems: matchings like [u]/[u:], [i]/[i:] instead of the modern types [ʊ]/[u:], [ɪ]/[i:] -a feature that was to persist well into the Early Modern period;
2. only three contrastive heights, as opposed to the four that were to develop in the thirteenth century;
3. <eo> = [e(:)o] and <ea> = [æ(:)ɑ] diphthongs only of the 'height-harmonic' type, i.e. with both elements of the same height, as opposed to the earlier and later closing types like /ai au/, and the much later centring types like /iə/ (*idea*).
4. front rounded vowels y(:) and ø (:) [note! ø (:) unrounded to e(:)]. y(:) and ø (:) were new phonemes in OE introduced after the operation of i-umlaut
5. length contrast for diphthongs (at least under traditional interpretation)

OE digraphs

OE manuscripts contain the following digraph spellings <ea, eo, io, ie> whose interpretation has long been the subject of much controversy in OE studies. See the handout on breaking for details.

<ea, eo, io> represent the following OE developments:

- WGmc diphthongs *au, *eu, *iu
- sounds resulting from the operation of breaking on the front vowels *æ(:), *e(:), *i(:)
- sound resulting from the operation of back umlaut on short æ, e, i

<ie> (present in early WS) represents the following development:

- the sounds developed by the operation of i-umlaut of OE diphthongs, i.e. i-umlaut of <ea, eo, io>

The original sound represented by <ie> must have monophthongised quite early as evidenced by spelling with <i> or <y> for earlier <ie>, hence earlier <hieran> 'hear' becomes <hiran> or <hyran>

Consonants

The late Old English consonant system was:

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------|-----|-----|----|---|----|----|-----|----|
| stops | p | t | tʃ | k | p: | t: | tʃ: | k: |
| | b | d | dʒ | g | b: | d: | dʒ: | g: |
| fricatives | f | θ s | ʃ | x | f: | θ: | s: | x: |
| nasals | m | n | | | m: | n: | | |
| liquids | r l | | | | r: | l: | | |
| glides | w | | j | | | | | |

features worth noting:

1. While stops and affricates were paired for voice, the fricatives were not; /f θ s/ were in most dialects voiceless except medially in the foot (between two voiced sounds). Thus [v ð z] appeared in native words only preceded by a stressed vowel (followed by an optional liquid or nasal) and followed by an unstressed vowel; /f θ s/ were always voiceless initially, finally and in clusters.
2. Old English had neither an /h/:/x/ contrast nor a phonemic velar nasal /ŋ/ ; [h] was the word - initial allophone of /x/, and [ŋ] an allophone of /n/ before velars.
3. OE /g/ had the fricative allophone [ɣ] (voiced velar fricative) between back vowels as in *dagas* 'day (nom./acc. pl.)' /dagas/ = [daɣas]; intervocalically if preceded by a front vowel it had the allophone [j], as in *dæge* 'day (dat. sg.)' /dæge/ = [dæje].
4. geminates
5. r