Old English – OE sound system

Vowels

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

Short
Monophthongs      Diphthongs
i   y   u
e (ø)   ø   o
æ   a

Long
Monophthongs      Diphthongs
i:   y:   u:
e: (ø:)   ø:   o:
æ:   æa

1. phonetic as well as phonological symmetry throughout the long and short systems: matchings like [u]/[u:], [i]/[i:] instead of the modern types [ø]/[ø:], [æ]/[æ] - 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(:)æ] 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)
6. no reduction to /a/ in unstressed positions

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.

<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>
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**Consonants**
The late Old English consonant system was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stops</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Tʃ</th>
<th>K</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Fricatives</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Nasals</td>
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<td>Glides</td>
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**Phonological patterns:**
1. While stops and affricates were paired for voice, the fricatives were not; /θ θ s/ were in most dialects voiceless except medially in the foot (between two voiced sounds). Thus [v θ z ] appeared in native words only preceded by a stressed vowel (followed by an optional liquid or nasal) and followed by an unstressed vowel; /θ θ s/ were always voiceless initially, finally and in clusters.
2. Geminates allowed unlike in MnE
3. /r/ occurred in all positions
4. Different phonotactic patterns - /kn, gn, xn, xl, xr, xw, fn, wl, wr/ grammatical in OE

**Phonemic inventory:**
5. 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.
6. OE /g/ had the fricative allophone [ɣ] (voiced velar fricative) between back vowels as in dagas 'day (nom./acc. pl.)' /dagas/ = [d₂ɣas]; intervocalically if preceded by a front vowel it had the allophone [j], as in dæge 'day (dat. sg.)' /dæge/ = [dæje].