

Overview

Early Old Norwegian is traditionally reconstructed as having a symmetric nine vowel inventory (Kristoffersen & Torp 2016) with a fairly one-to-one correspondence between sound and graphic inventories.

(1) Traditional Early Old Norwegian vowel inventory

i / i:	<i>	y / y:	<y>	u / u:	<u>
e / e:	<e>	ø / ø:	<œ>	o / o:	<o>
æ / æ:	<æ>	a / a:	<a>	ɒ / ɒ:	<ɒ>

Historical **e* and **æ* vowels merged, thought to be complete by mid-13th century in Norway (Hreinn Benediktsson 1964) as evidenced by a loss of orthographic distinction (2).

(2) Etymological and non-etymological **e* – **æ* spellings

DG8 (c 1225–50) **e* – <e> / **æ* – <æ>

<i>*e</i>	<gevet>	give-PP.	<þrenn>	three/triple-NOM.PL.
<i>*æ</i>	<næmdr>	mention-PP.	<sændir>	send-PRES.3.SG.

H6 (c 1275) **e* / **æ* – <e>

<i>*e</i>	<gevet>	give-PP.	<þrennom>	three/triple-DAT.PL.
<i>*æ</i>	<nefndr>	mention-PP.	<sendir>	send-PRES.3.SG.

Claim #1: Old Norwegian spelling and phonological patterns show this is an oversimplification. Short *æ* and *ɒ* were non-low /*ɛ*, ɔ/ (Sandstedt 2014).

(3) Revised Early Old Norwegian vowel inventory

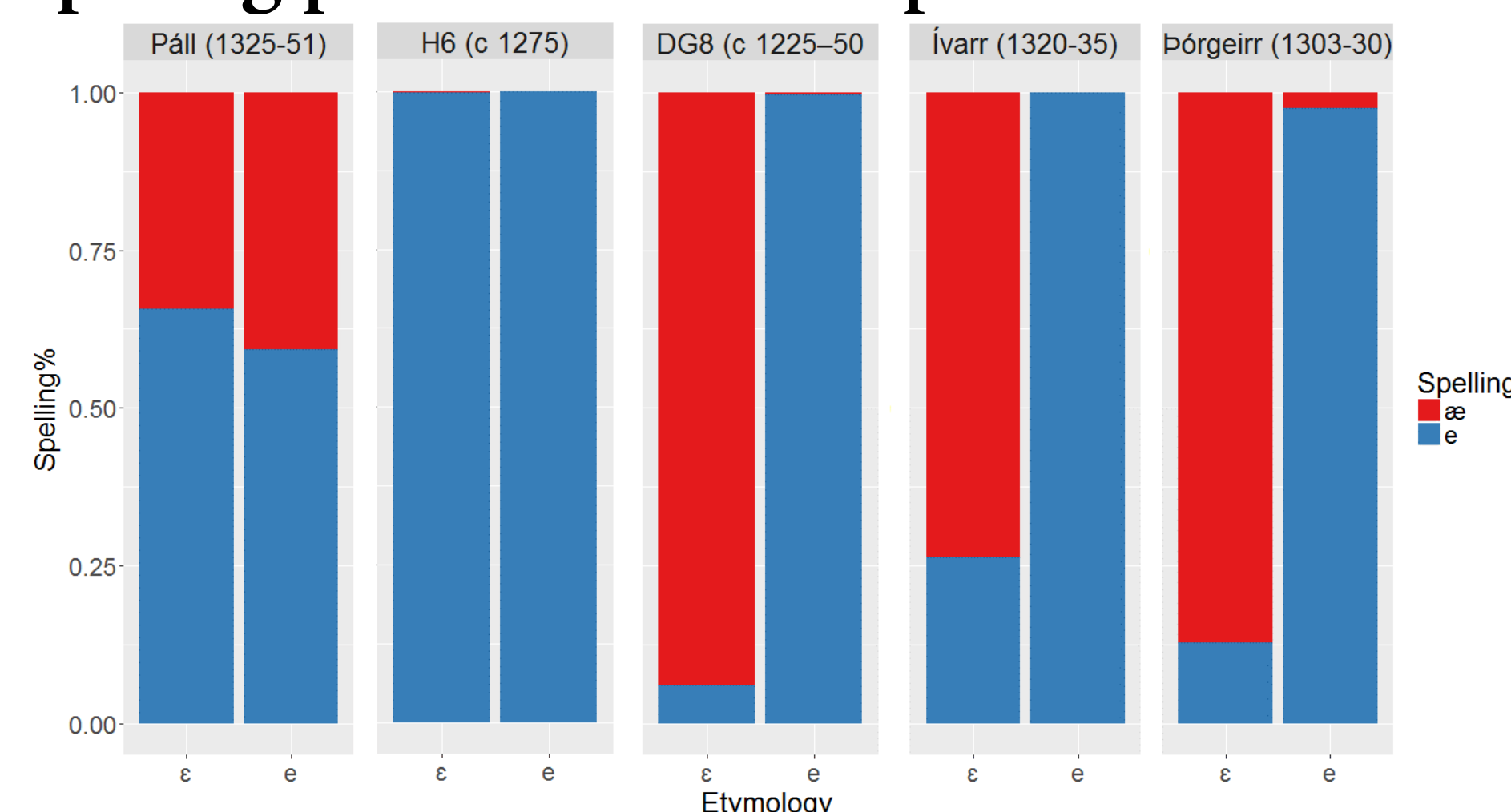
i / i:	y / y:	u / u:
e / e:	ø / ø:	o / o:
ɛ		ɔ
æ:	a / a:	ɒ:

Orthographic Evidence

Old Norwegian scribes display one of three orthographic patterns:

- 1) overlapping <e, æ> spellings for both **e* – **ɛ* (Páll)
- 2) no **e* – **ɛ* spelling distinction (H6)
- 3) correlated **e* – <e> and **ɛ* – <æ> spellings (DG8, Ívarr, Þórgeirr)

(4) **e* – **ɛ* spelling patterns manuscripts and charters



Scribes which feature an etymological spelling distinction display asymmetric variation (DG8; $\chi^2 = 78.70$, $df = 1$, $n = 2671$, $p < .01$).

- one-to-one **e* – <e> but one-to-many **ɛ* – <æ, e>.

(5) DG8 **ɛ*-spelling variation

<mærki>	[mɛrki]	mark-ACC.SG.
<merki>	[mɛrki]	mark-ACC.SG.
<gængit>	[gɛngit]	walked-PP.-NOM.N.SG.
<genginn>	[gɛnginn]	walked-PP.-NOM.M.SG.

This is predicted by the representations in (3, 6) given the asymmetry between sound and graphic inventories.

(6) Sound – letter asymmetries in Old Norwegian writing

e / e:	< e>	< o>	o / o:
ɛ	<æ e>	<a o>	ɔ
æ:	<æ >	<a >	ɒ:

Phonological Evidence

Claim #2: While not all scribes distinguish the vowels in writing, distinctive vowel harmony patterns show the **e* – **ɛ* contrast was maintained in Norway until at least the mid-14th century (7).

- height harmonic /þess-ir/ → [þesser], *[þessir] this-NOM.M.PL.
- height disharmonic /hver-ir/ → [hverir], *[hverer] every-NOM.M.PL.

(7) Etymologically correlated harmony patterns in H6

High vs. non-high harmony

<funnin>	[funn-inn]	found-NOM.M.SG.	<rikir>	[ri:k-ir]	rich-NOM.M.PL.
<komenn>	[kom-enn]	come-NOM.M.SG.	<goðer>	[go:ð-er]	good-NOM.M.PL.

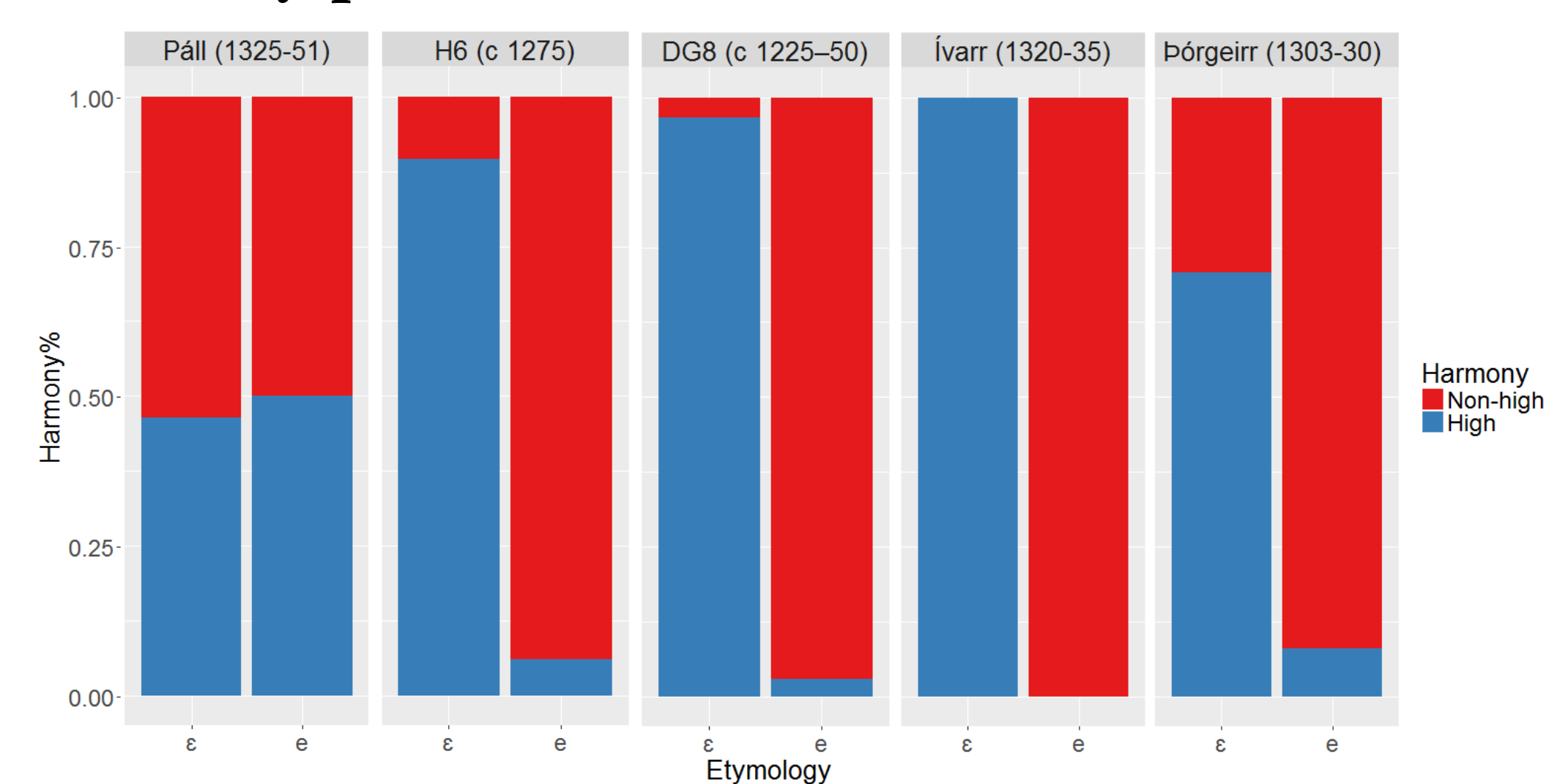
**e* – height harmony

<dreppenn>	[drep-enn]	killed-NOM.M.SG.	<þesser>	[þess-er]	this-NOM.M.PL.
<geven>	[gev-enn]	given-NOM.M.SG.	<veger>	[veg-er]	way-NOM.M.PL.

**ɛ* – neutral harmony

<tekinn>	[tɛk-inn]	taken-NOM.M.SG.	<huerir>	[hwɛr-ir]	every-NOM.M.PL.
<fenginn>	[fɛng-inn]	caught-NOM.M.SG.	<helgir>	[hɛlg-ir]	holy-NOM.M.PL.

(8) **e* – **ɛ* harmony patterns



H6 displays correlated phonological but indistinct spelling patterns, suggesting exclusively short vowel letter—sound correspondences (cf. 6, 9)

(9) H6 short and long vowel sound—spelling correspondence

e	<e>	< o>	o
e:	<e>	<O>	o:
ɛ	<e>	<a o>	ɔ
		<a >	a
æ:	<æ>	<a>	ɒ:

(10) H6 **ɛ* / **e* – <e> and **ɔ* – <a, o> spelling variation

<gevet>	[gevet]	give-PP.	<fiolldi>	[fjɔldi]	multitude-NOM.SG.
<gevet>	[gevet]	give-PP.	<fialldi>	[fjɔldi]	multitude-NOM.SG.
<gengit>	[gɛngit]	walked-PP.	<hofðingia>	[hɔfðingja]	chief-ACC.SG.
<gengit>	[gɛngit]	walked-PP.	<hafðingia>	[hɔfðingja]	chief-ACC.SG.

Summary

Spelling alone is not sufficient evidence for accurate reconstructions based on historical written material. Both orthographic and phonological criteria are necessary to identify mergers / contrasts where there are asymmetries between sound and letter inventories.

Claim #1: Old Norwegian /e/ – /ɛ/, not /e/ – /æ/

Evidence by asymmetric spelling variation:

- **e* – <e>, **ɛ* – <e, æ>, **æ* – <æ>

Claim #2: The **e* – **ɛ* distinction was maintained in dialects of Old Norwegian until at least the middle of the 14th century

Evidenced by distinctive vowel harmony patterns regardless spelling

- **e* – harmonic <þesser> vs. **ɛ* – disharmonic <hverir>

Textual sources

Páll:	Páll Styrkársson	(fl. 1325–51)	/e /	<e, æ>
H6:	Holm perg 6 fol.	(c 1275)	/e, ɛ/	<e >
DG8:	De la Gardie 8 – 70–110v	(c 1225–50)	/e, ɛ/	<e, æ>
Ívarr:	Ívarr Auðunarson	(fl. 1320–35)	/e, ɛ/	<e, æ>
Þórgeirr:	Þórgeirr Tófasen	(fl. 1303–30)	/e, ɛ/	<e, æ>