

ELVES IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

ALARIC HALL

Hvað er með álfum? Elves in Iceland across the Conversion

Alaric Hall, University of Leeds

www.alarichall.org.uk
alaric@cantab.net

handout and presentation at:
<http://www.alarichall.org.uk/imc2011>

Superstition?

- * term of abuse coming to prominence in the Reformation
- * implies a left-over: something that's fossilised
- * more helpful to talk about 'beliefs'

What is reality?

- * physical, objective reality
- * social reality
- * something weirder than social reality: a cultural discourse?



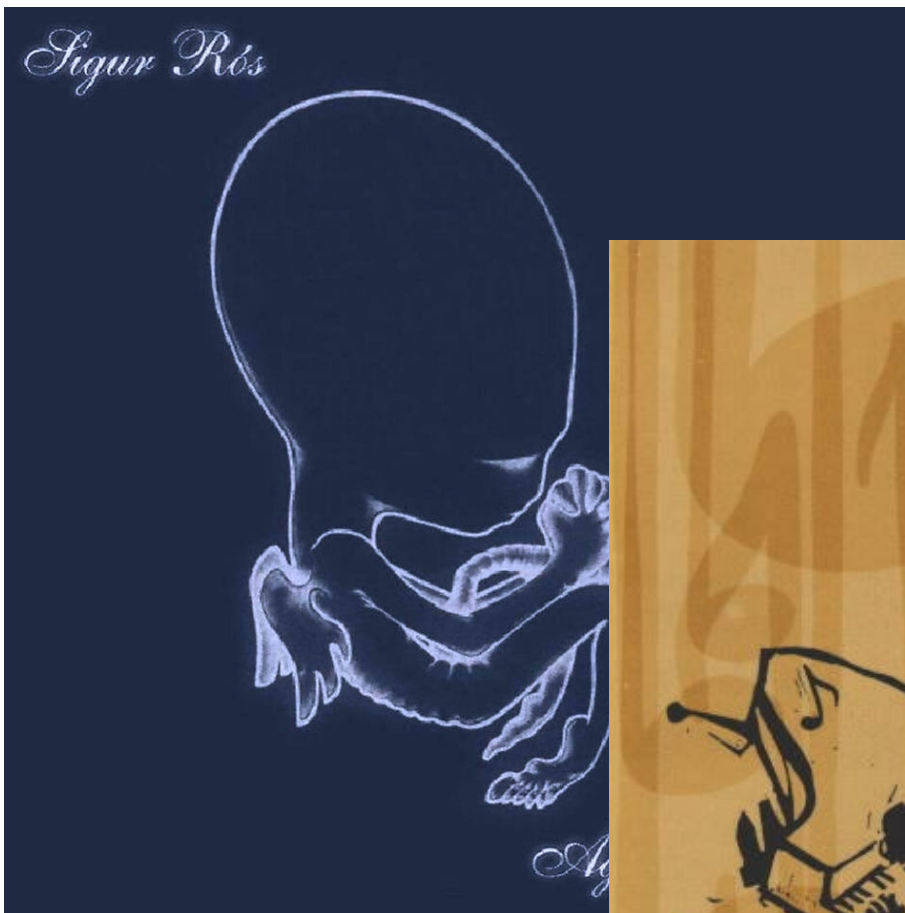
Sigur Rós, *Ágætis byrjun*, 1999:
'Starálfur' ('stare-elf')



Sigur Rós, *Ágætis byrjun*
'Starálfur' ('stare-elf')



Björk Guðmundsdóttir & tríó
Guðmundar Ingólssonar, *Gling-Gló* (1990):
'Litli tónlistamaðurinn' ('the little musician')



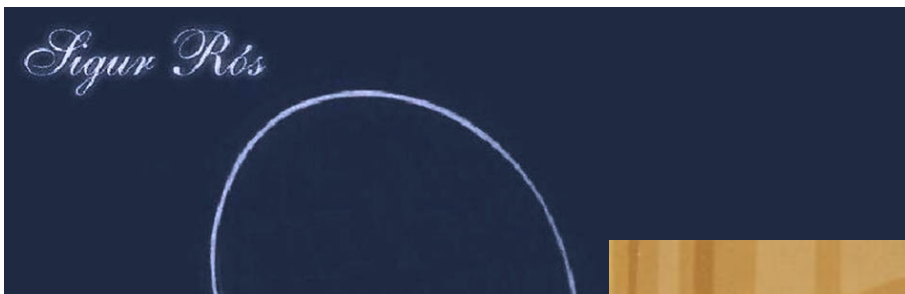
Sigur Rós, *Ágætis byrjun*
'Starálfur' ('stare-elf')



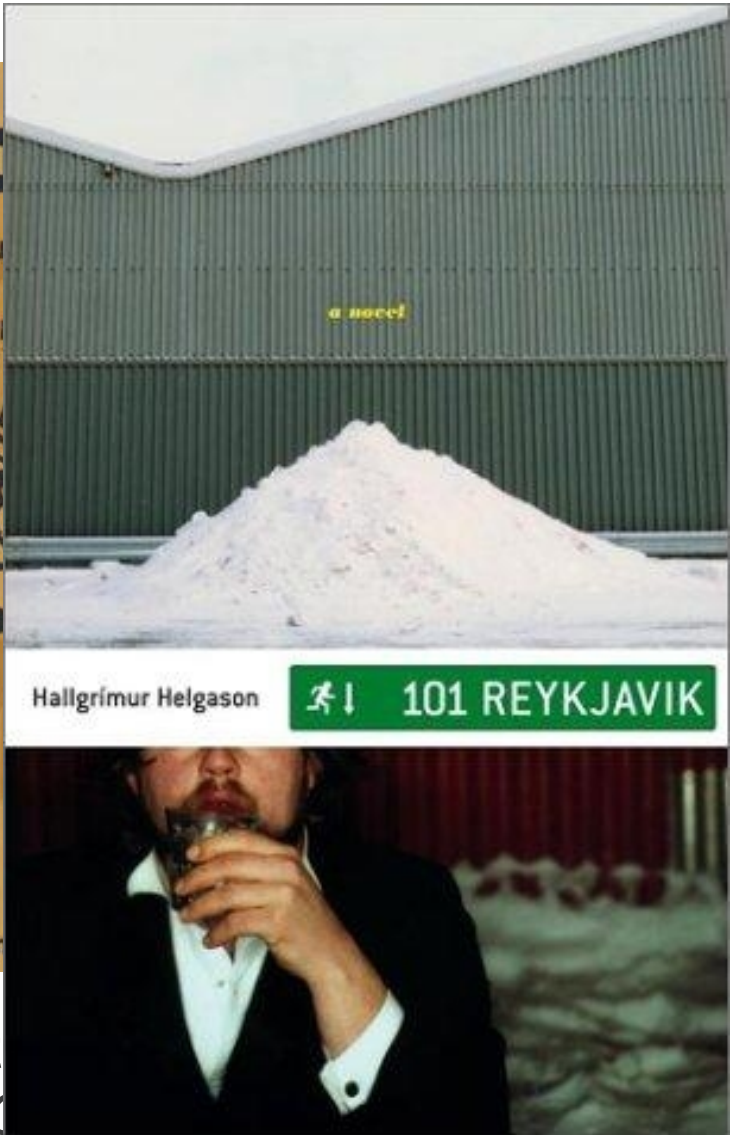
Björk Guðmundsdóttir & the Guðmundar Ingólfssonar Trio
Gló (1990):
'Litli tónlistamaðurinn' ('the little musician')

Hallgrímur Helgason, *101 Reykjavík*, 1994



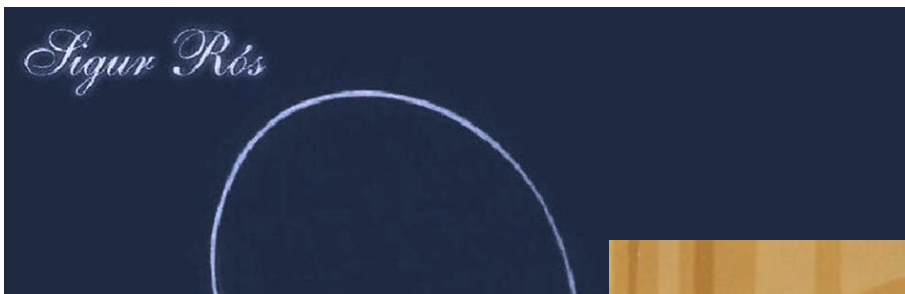


Hallgrímur Helgason, *101 Reykjavík*, 1994



Guðmundsdóttir & trío Guðmundar Ingólssonar, *Litli tónlistamaðurinn* ('the little musician') (1990):

Ágúst Guðmundsson, *Mávahlátur*, 2001



Hallgrímur Helgason, 101 Reykjavík, 1994



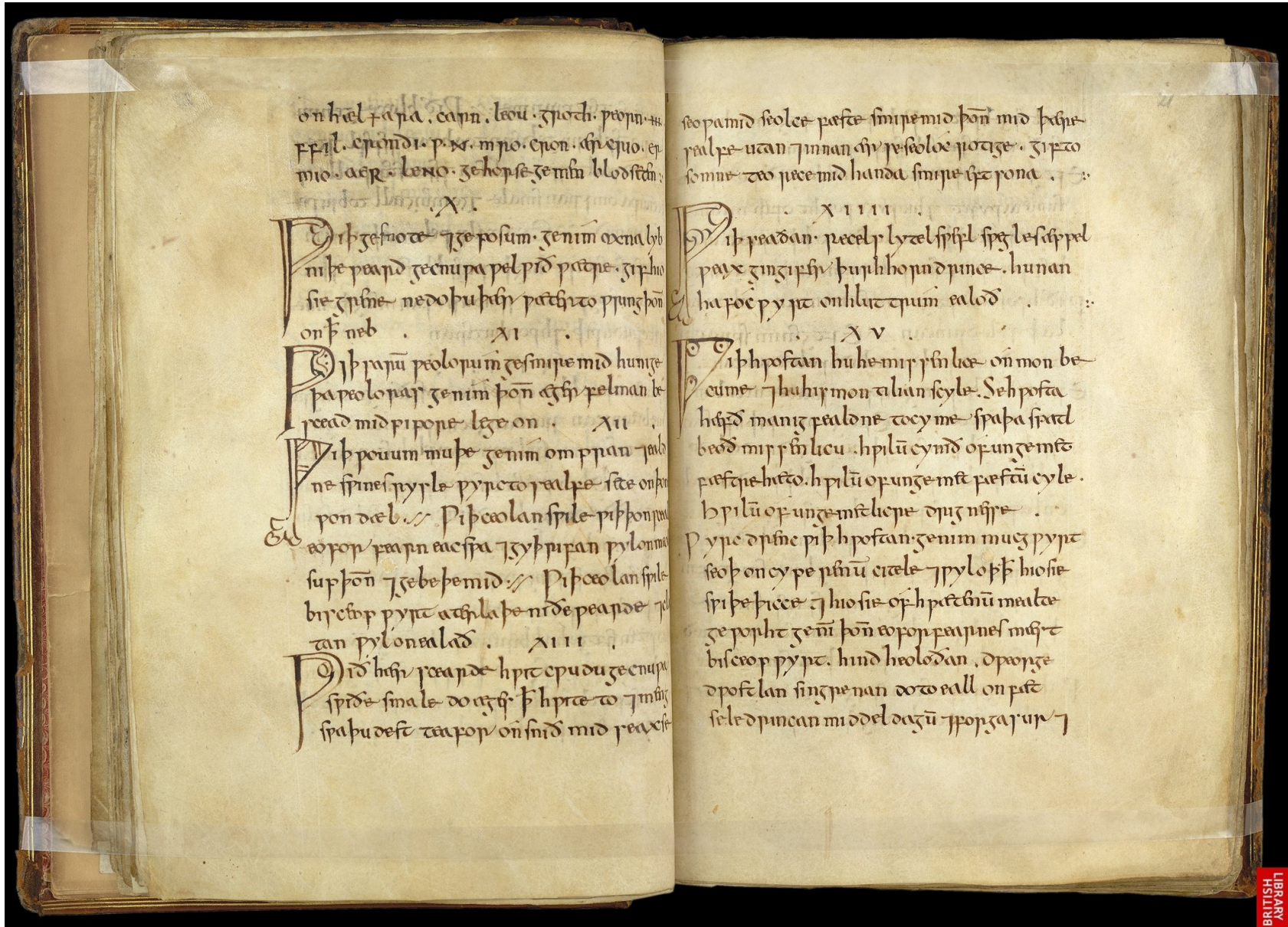
Ágúst Guðmundsson, Mávahlátur, 2001



Grímur Hákonarson, Sumarlandið, 2010

Our earliest evidence: elves in Anglo-Saxon England (C7–11)

- * cause illness (mostly mind-altering illnesses)



Our earliest evidence: elves in Anglo-Saxon England (C7–11)

- * cause illness (mostly mind-altering illnesses)
- * human (*ælf* 'elves' is grammatically an ethnonym)
- * cool enough to name your children after (Ælfred, etc.)
- * associated with pagan gods (*ese*)
- * associated with hills and valleys (*ylfedene*, now Elveden, Suffolk)
- * distinct in most evidence from monsters like *þýrsas*, *dweorgas*, *eotenas*, *entas*
- * associated in learned texts, with varying degrees of closeness, with demons of Christian mythology

Our earliest evidence: the *áes síde* in Ireland

Serglige Con Culainn (C9×C11)

Cú Chulainn went then and put his back against a pillar stone, and he was downcast, and a sleep fell upon him. He saw two women come towards him. One wore a green mantle; the other a purple mantle in five folds. The woman in the green mantle came to him and laughed at him, and struck him with her horse-whip. The other came to him, too, and laughed at him, and struck him in the same way. And they continued for a long time, each of them in turn coming still to beat him, so that he was almost dead. Then they went from him. The Ulaid observed that, and they said that he should be awakened. 'No', said Fergus. 'Do not disturb him. It is a vision that he sees.'

Our earliest evidence: skaldic verse

Bragi Boddason, *Ragnarsdrápa* (C9)

Flaut of set við sveita
sóknar alfs, í golfi,
hræva dōgg, þars hōggnar
hendr sem fōetr of kendu.
Fell í blóði blandinn
brunn ǫlskakki runna
—þat 's á Leifa landa
laufi fátt—at haufði.

Streamed over seats with sweat [?=blood]
of the álfr of attack [=warrior], on the floor,
corpses' dew [=blood], where hewed
hands/arms like legs/feet they recognised.
Fell in, with blood mixed,
a river, ale-giver of bushes [=men; men's ale-
giver=king] (that is on Leifi's lands' [=the sea]
leaf [the sea's leaf=decorated shield] drawn)
at his head.

Corpses' dew streamed over seats with the sweat/blood of the *álfr*
of attack on the floor, where hewed hands like feet could be
recognised. The ale-giver of bushes fell head-first into a river
mixed with blood; that is depicted on the leaf of Leifi's lands.

Our earliest evidence: skaldic verse

Other words for supernatural beings used like *alfr* in kennings:

Kennings for men: *ás* ('pagan god'); *goð* ('god', rarely), *regin* ('gods', rarely).

Kennings for women: *ásynja* ('pagan goddess'), *dís* (valkyrie type woman), *bönd* ('bonds, goddesses', rarely), *norn* ('supernatural female with powers over the future', rarely.)

There are lots of words for supernatural beings which are not used, such as *jötun*, *þurs* or *dvergr*.

Our earliest evidence: Eddaic verse

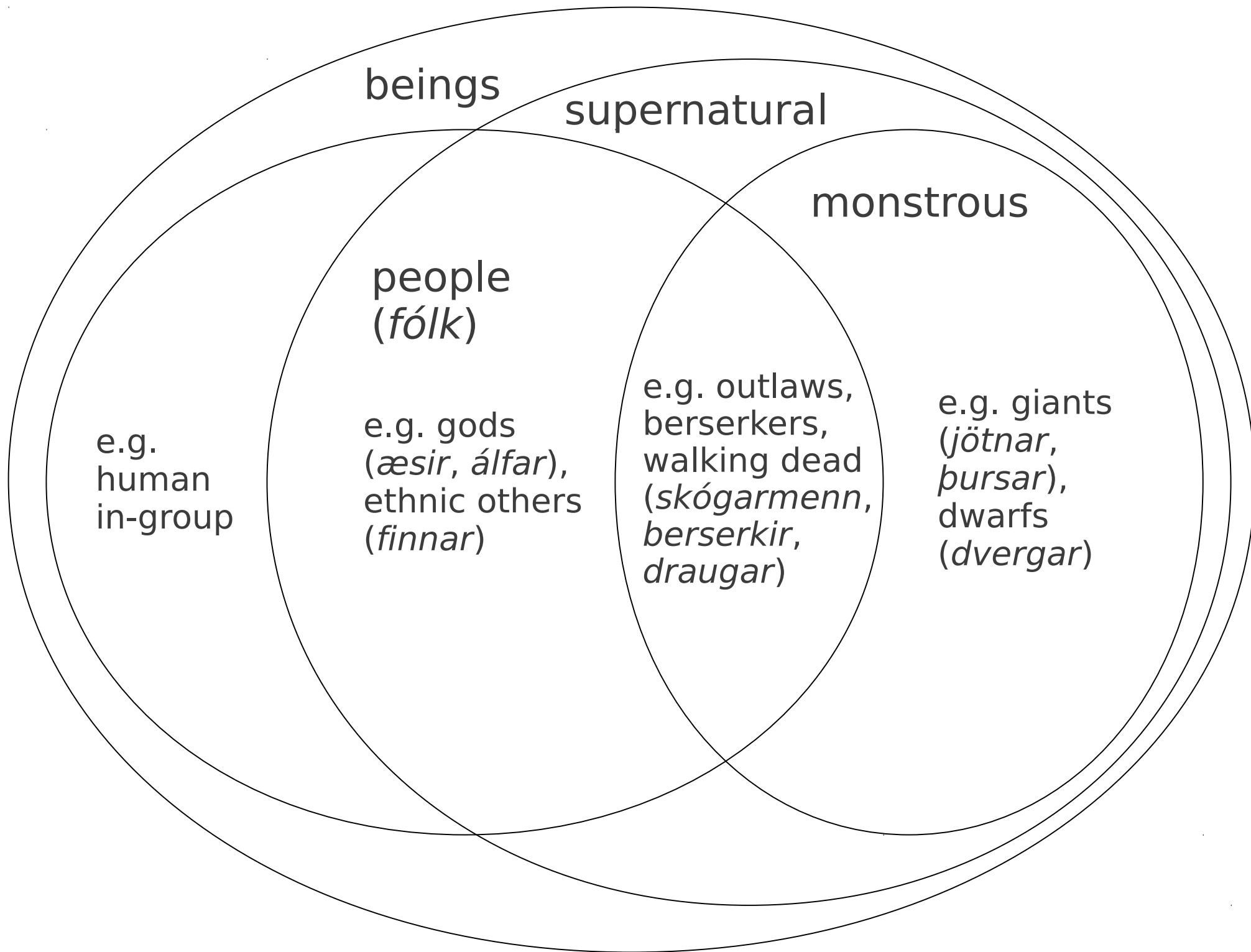
***Völuspá*, st. 48 (MS C13)**

Hvat er með Ásum?
Hvat er með Alfum?
Gnýr allr Jötunheimr,
Æsir ro á þingi,
stynja dvergar
fyr steindurum,
veggbergs vísir.
Vituð ér enn—eða hvat?

Völuspá st. 48

What's up with the *Æsir*?
What's up with the *Álfar*?
The whole of Jötunheimr groans,
Æsir are at in a meeting,
dvergar howl
before their stone-doors,
the wise ones of the cliff.
Do you want to know more—or what?

Völuspá st. 48



Iceland!

- * c. 1220×40: *Snorra Edda* (*ljósálfar* and *dökkálfar* as paganised versions of angels and demons)
- * c. 1300–: romances (kennings, but also narratives: prose, *rímur*, ballads)
- * c. C16: prayers
- * c. C17: theological debates
- * C19–20: folktale collections
- * C20–21: popular culture

Iceland!

- * c. 1220×40: *Snorra Edda* (*ljósálfar* and *dökkálfar* as paganised versions of angels and demons)
- * c. 1300–: romances (kennings, but also narratives: prose, *rímur*, ballads)
- * c. C16: prayers
- * c. C17: theological debates
- * C19–20: folktale collections
- * C20–21: popular culture

Thanks, Haukur!

***Álfar* and monsters, *álfar* and environment**

***Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, earlier recension**

The king had a golden pipe and blew into it loudly. Then Austvestan saw that hillocks and hills, hummocks and rocks opened up; and out came *álfar* and *nornir*, *dvergar* and *huldumenn*. The king took a purse full of gold and threw it out onto the plain, and those who were outside accepted it and divided it up to share it between themselves. The king blows once more into his pipe, and then the cliffs, glaciers and mountain-tops opened up and out came *pursar* and *risar* and *bergbúar* and all kinds of *óþjóðir*, and rushed out onto the plain. Then the king took another purse and the king threw it out to them, and they received it and divided it up.

Álfar and monsters, *álfar* and environment

Jarlmanns rímur

Blæs þá ræsir býsna hátt
beint í pípu eina
úr holtum stoltum hefur sig brátt
huldufólk með sveina.

Then the king blows rather loud,
right into a pipe. From their
gallant hillocks the *huldufólk* stir
quickly with their boys.

Fornar nornir fá þeir séð
fara þær nú til leika
álfar sjálfir eru þar með
og út á völinn reika.

They could see pagan *nornir*
going now to play;
the *álfar* themselves are also
there, and rush out on the plain.

Álfar and monsters, *álfar* and environment, prayers and curses

Buslubæn ('Busla's bidding') from *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*

Tröll ok álfar ok töfrnornir,
búar, bergrisar brenni þínar hallir,
hati þik hrímpursar, hestar streði þik,
stráin strangi þik, en stormar æri þik,
ok vei verði þér, nema þú vilja minn gerir.

May *tröll* and *álfar* and magic-*nornir*, dwellers (cf. *bergbúar*, 'mountain-dwellers'),
mountain-giants, burn your halls,
frost-*pursar* despise you, horses bugger you,
the straws sting you, and gales drive you mad,
and woe befall you, unless you do my will.

Álfar and monsters, álfar and environment, prayers and curses

***Dæglur* ('Day-prayers'); perhaps sixteenth-century**

Geymdu í dag við grimmum tröllum,
gjám og skriðum, skaparinn mig,
fyrir álfa kind og öndum snjöllum
er atskot veita hörmulig,
meinfuglum og móðum öllum,
myrkri og þoku, þess beiði eg þig.

Protect me today, Creator, from cruel trolls,
crevasses and landslides;
from elvenkind and clever spirits
that serve up the horrible *at-skot*;
from harm-birds and all mist,
darkness and fog, I beg this of you.

Álfar, sex and gender

Bergen rune-stave

Ríst ek bótrúnar,
ríst ek bjargrúnar,
einfalt við álfum,
tvífalt við tröllum,
þrífalt við þursum
[...]
Ek sendi þér,
ek sé á þér,
ylgjar ergi ok ópola.
Á þér renni ópoli
ok 'ioluns' móð.
Sittu aldri,
sof þu aldri

...

ant mér sem sjalfri þér

I carve remedy-runes,
I carve protection runes,
once over by *álfar*,
twice over by *tröll*
thrice over by *þursar*
[...]
I send to you,
I see on you,
she-wolf's lust and restlessness.
May restlessness come over you
and a jötunn's fury.
Never sit,
never sleep.

...

Love me as you love yourself.

Álfar, sex and gender

c. C10 Anglo-Saxon medical texts mentioning *ælfside*

***Völundarkviða* (English-influenced?)**

Serlige Con Culainn

C12 Marie de France's (Anglo-)Norman *lais* of seductive *fées* (male and female)

late C13 ***Njáls saga*: 'Skarphéðinn mælti: "Sjáið þér rauðálfinn sveinar?" ' ('Skarphéðinn said "Do you see the red-elf, lads?" ')**

South English Legendary description of elves

c. 1350 ***Gullkársljóð***

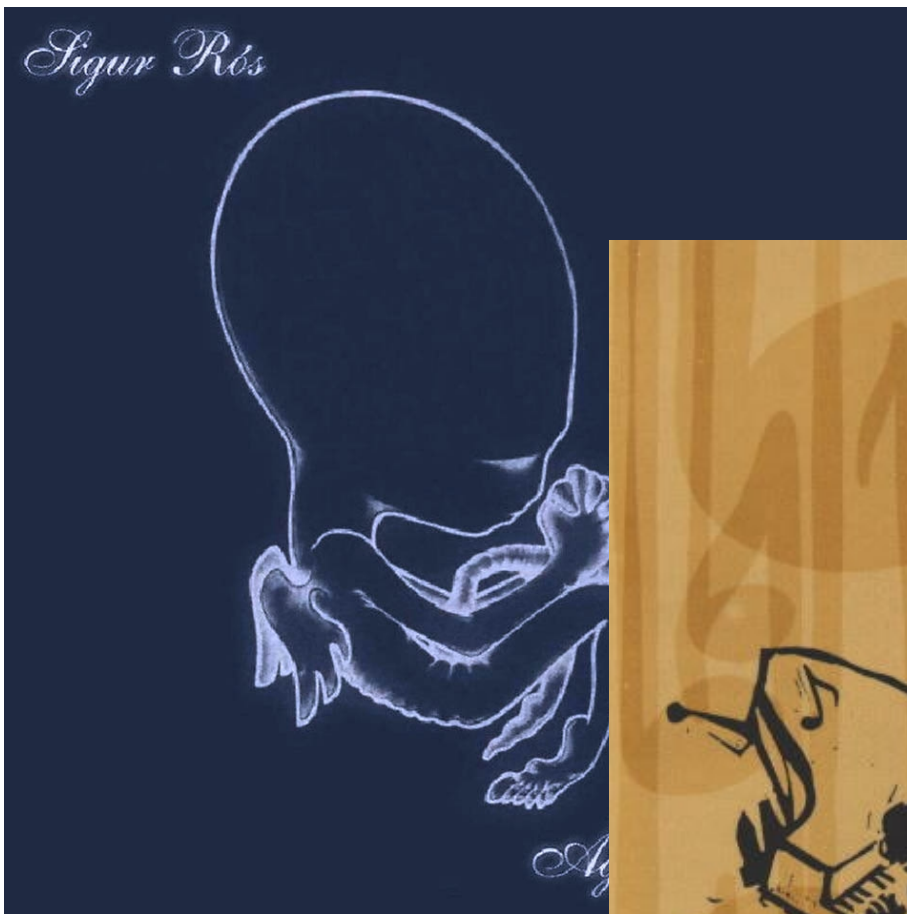
C16 Manuscripts of ***Ólafur liljurós*** and ***Hrólfs saga kraka***

Iceland!

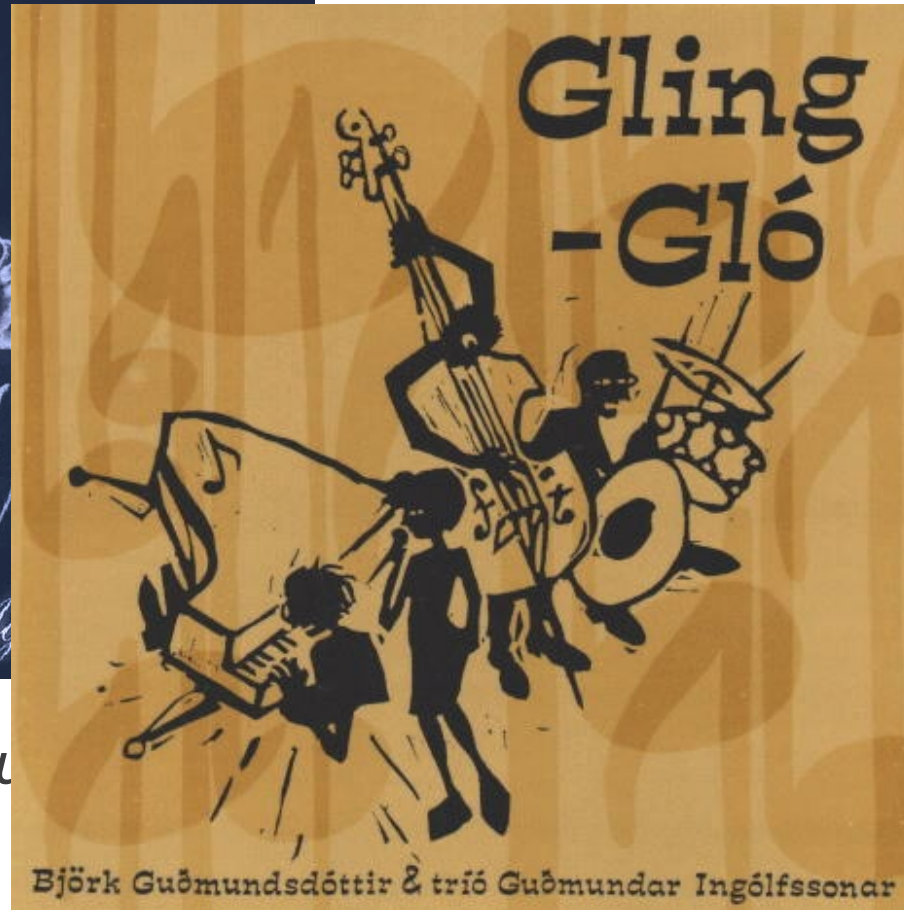
- * c. 1220×40: *Snorra Edda* (*ljósálfar* and *dökkálfar* as paganised versions of angels and demons)
- * c. 1300–: romances (kennings, but also narratives: prose, *rímur*, ballads)
- * c. C16: prayers
- * c. C17: theological debates
- * C19–20: folktale collections
- * C20–21: popular culture



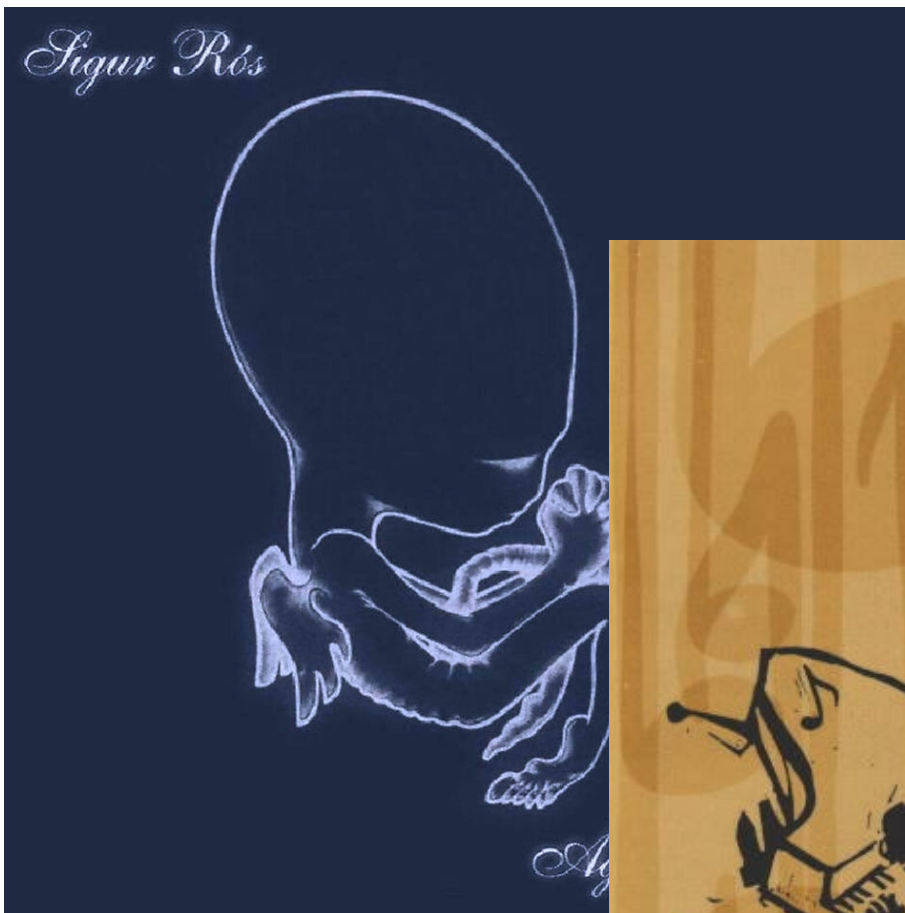
Sigur Rós, *Ágætis byrjun*, 1999:
'Starálfur' ('stare-elf')



Sigur Rós, *Ágætis byrjun*
'Starálfur' ('stare-elf')



Björk Guðmundsdóttir & tríó
Guðmundar Ingólssonar, *Gling-Gló* (1990):
'Litli tónlistamaðurinn' ('the little musician')



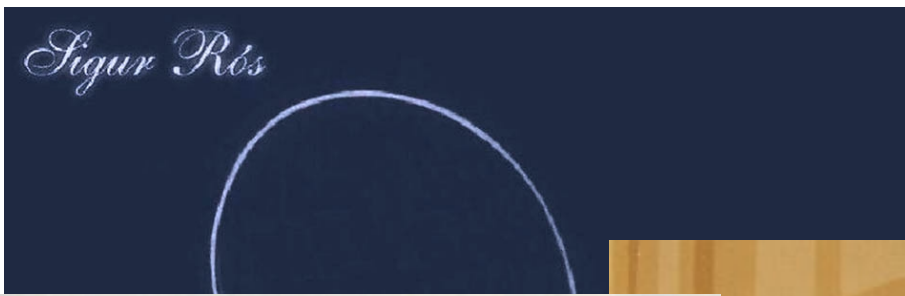
Sigur Rós, *Ágætis byrjun*
'Starálfur' ('stare-elf')



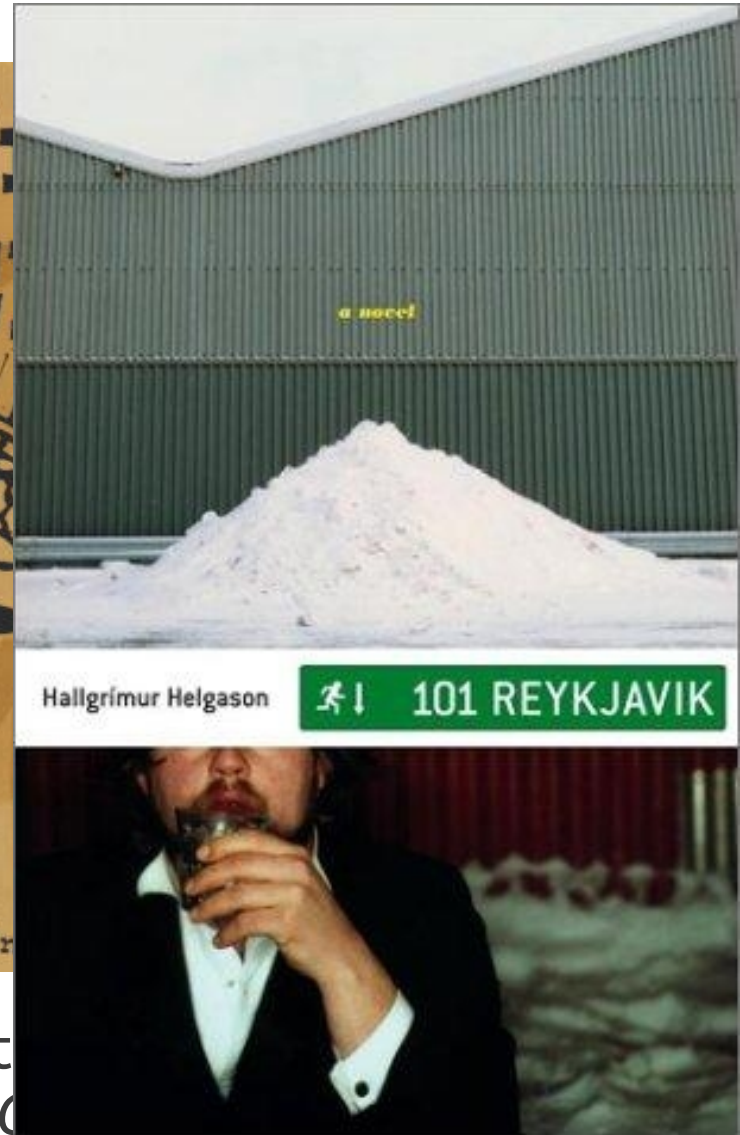
Björk Guðmundsdóttir & the Guðmundar Ingólfssonar Trio
Gló (1990):
'Litli tónlistamaðurinn' ('the little musician')

Hallgrímur Helgason, *101 Reykjavík*, 1994



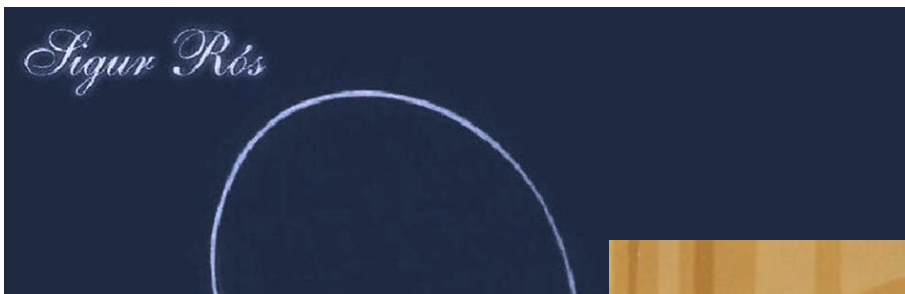


Hallgrímur Helgason, *101 Reykjavík*, 1994



Ágúst Guðmundsson, *Mávahlátur*, 2001
 Ágúst Guðmundsson & Tríó Guðmundar Ingólssonar, *Litli tónlistamaðurinn* ('the little musician') (1990):

Ágúst Guðmundsson, *Mávahlátur*, 2001



Hallgrímur Helgason, 101 Reykjavík, 1994



Ágúst Guðmundsson, Mávahlátur, 2001



Grímur Hákonarson, Sumarlandið, 2010