



The Icelandic *rímur* (and why you should care more about them than you do)

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Rímur 101

Rímur are long Icelandic narrative poems which were delivered orally, sung or chanted in a manner called *að kveða*.

They represent the most important literary genre in Iceland from the late middle ages to the beginning of the 20th century.

Over 1000 *rímur* are preserved. About a quarter are single poems of anywhere between 50 and 200 stanzas, while the rest are sets or cycles (*rímur*, *rímnaflokkar*), divided into fits (fyttes) or cantos, each called a *ríma*.

Pre-1600: 78 *rímur*
17th cent.: 148 *rímur*
18th cent.: 248 *rímur*
19th cent.: 505 *rímur*
20th cent.: 75+ *rímur*

Ca. 300 *rímur* for which we have evidence have not survived.

There is nothing quite like them anywhere else in the world.



Metre

Rímur are characterised first and foremost by their highly complex metres.

The most common *rímur*-metre is *ferskeytt*, a four-line stanza rhyming a b a b, with the a-rhymes masculine and the b-rhymes feminine.

Closely related are *samhent*, rhyming a a a a, *stafhent*, a a b b, and *gagaraljóð*, a b a b (all rhymes masculine).

In addition to rhyme there is alliteration, the first line of the couplet containing two alliterating words, on the first and third, second and third or third and fourth stressed syllables, and the second line one, always on the first stressed syllable.

Hef ég okkar **h**áttalag
hugsað um í næði;
eina nótt og **e**ngan dag
áttum við þá bæði.

Although four-line stanzas are the rule, there are also metres employing three- and even two-line stanzas. Twenty basic types in all.



Metre – variants

There are variants of each type making use of internal rhyme, both vertical and horizontal.

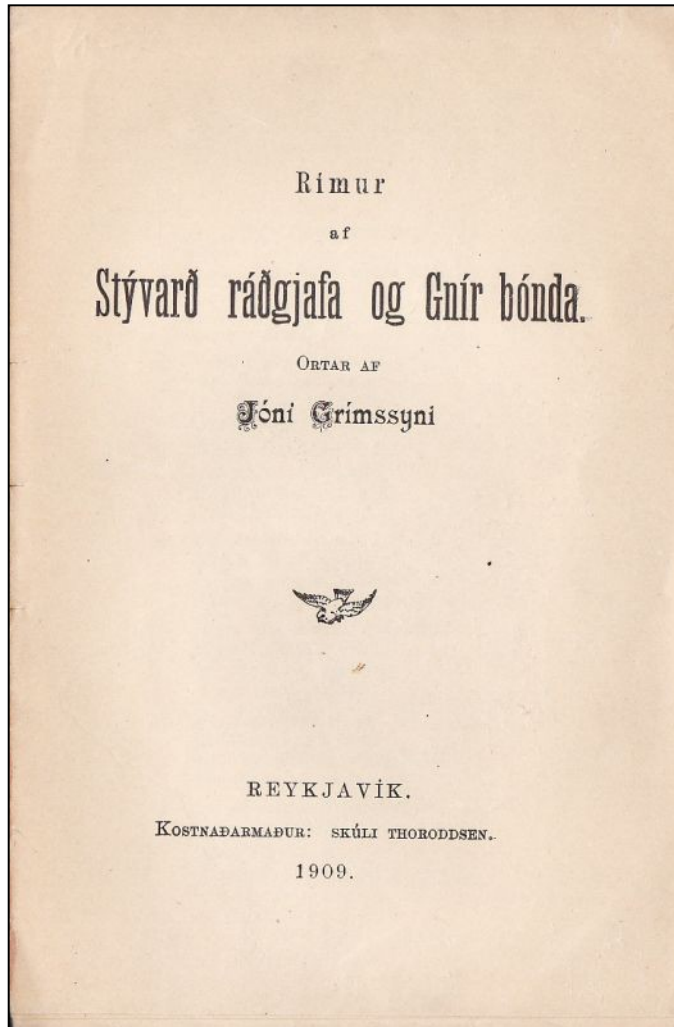
Sr. Helgi Sigurðsson, *Safn til bragfræði íslenzkra rímna að fornu og nýju* (Reykjavík, 1891), identified over 2000 different variants.

Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, *Bragfræði og háttatal* (1953, 2nd ed. 1985), available on-line on the website of Kvæðamannafélag Iðunn (<http://rimur.is/>).

Bragi (<http://bragi.arnastofnun.is/>) has a wealth of information on Icelandic metres of all kinds, each illustrated graphically. *Ferskeytt hringhent*, for example, looks like this:



A somewhat extreme example



From *Rímur af Stývarð ráðgjafa og Gnír bónda* by Jón Grímsson (1804-1870).

Final verse of the 2nd ríma:

Þeyttur dettur háttur hér,
þreyttur léttur máttur er,
fleyttur settur bátur bumbs,
breyttur sléttur hlátur dumbs.

Poetic language

Rímur make extensive use of kennings and *heiti*, both of which derive from skaldic poetry.

Kennings for 'woman', for example, usually have as their base word either a goddess's name or a word for land, and as their determinant a word for gold, jewellery, fine clothing or riches, e.g. *seima-Gná* or *auðar-rein*. *Heiti* for women include *drós*, *fljóð*, *brúður*, *víf*, *sprund* and *snót*.

There are also kennings and *heiti* for men, both individually and in groups, the earth, the sun, fire, water, wind and rain, gold and silver, giants, dwarves and elves, battles, wounds, blood, swords and other weapons, ships and parts thereof, wine and mead, and poetry itself.

The literal meaning of these terms was of little importance to the poet, his choice being dictated entirely by the requirements of the form.



Subject matter

The subject matter of the *rímur* was generally borrowed from pre-existing narratives, in particular the indigenous romances and *fornaldarsögur*.

Most, in fact, more than once: there are eight sets of *rímur* based on *Nitida saga*, for example, the earliest dating from the seventeenth century and the latest composed in 1866, while *Þorsteins saga bæjarmagns* was used as the basis for nine extant sets of *rímur*, and *rímur* which have not survived have been ascribed to no fewer than ten other poets.

In a number of cases the only evidence we have for the existence of a saga are the *rímur* that were based on it.

Not infrequently there are later prose versions of these *rímur*. *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, for example, is a late 17th-century prose version of the *rímur* known as *Griplur*, which are presumed to have been based on medieval saga now lost.



The *mansöngvar*

A *mansöngur*, literally ‘maid-song’, is a non-narrative section introducing a *ríma* in which the poet addresses the audience directly, chiefly on the vicissitudes of love, growing old or the act of versifying.

Áður finnst um auðar ná
afmórs vers í minni skrá;
enginn veit hvar höldum hjá
heimskur situr ef þegja má.

Previously there could be found
love poems among my verses;
the foolish man goes unobserved
if among others he can remain silent.

Gunnlöð kennir Fjölnirs fund
fyrst að geyma langa stund;
blekkþ var af því bauga grund,
að Bölverk hafði slæga lund.

Gunnlöð guarded poetry
for a long while at first;
she was deceived because
Bölverkur had a cunning nature.

Lítið nokkuð lagði hann á,
ljóðin hljóta að standa smá;
enginn skyldi auðar ná that no one should without grief
angurlaust með kvæðum fá.

He brought it about
— something that will remain with poems;
gain a woman’s love through verse.

Því hef eg ekki vanist þar við;
varla hafa þeir jafnan sið;
sjaldan bregður mjaldur mið;
misjaft verður um kvenna frið.

So I have not made a practice of it
— for others it may be different;
the leopard cannot change its spots;
woman’s favour is fickle.



Performance



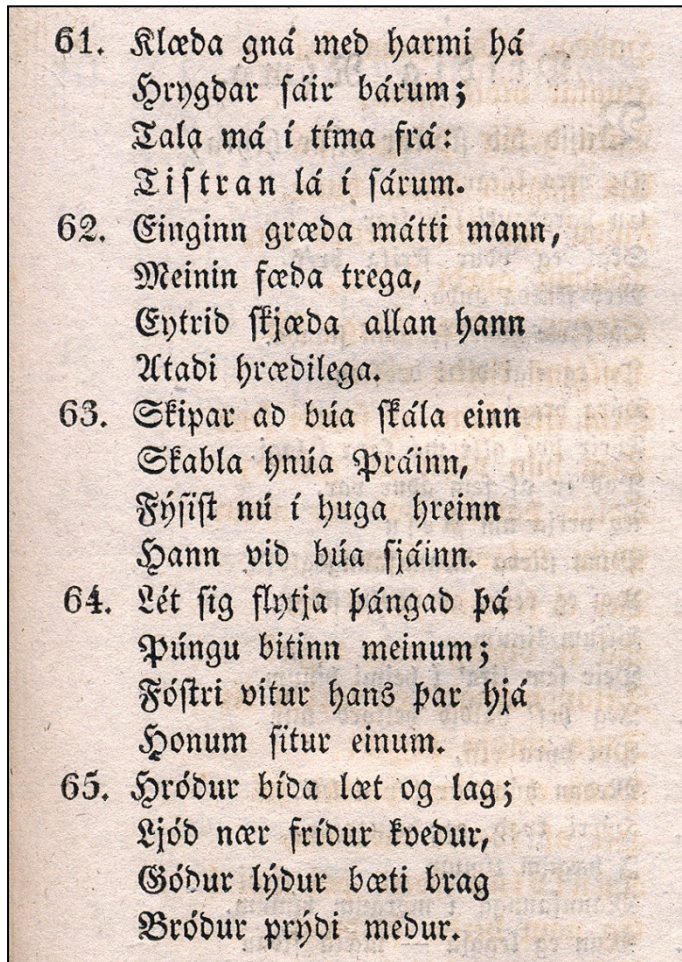
Rímur were intended to be heard rather than read, being chanted or half-sung in a manner called *að kveða*. Such performances were a staple of the *kvöldvaka* or evening wake, but *rímur* could also be recited in other situations.

In recitations forming part of the *kvöldvaka*, the *kvæðamaður* would normally recite from a book, but *rímur*, or parts thereof, could also be recited from memory.

Many *rímur*-tunes (*kvæðalög* or *stemmur*) exist, some of considerable antiquity.

Kvæðamannafélag Iðunn has a register of *rímur*-tunes which currently numbers 500.

From *Rímur af Tistrani og Indíönu*



Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798–1846),
Rímur af Tistrani og Indíönu,
 composed in 1828. 14 *rímur* (each
 of ca. 65 verses). Printed in
 Copenhagen in 1831 and
 preserved in 7 MSS.



Einar Einarsson, b. 1905, Haukaberg
 á Barðaströnd (Northwestern
 Iceland), recorded 2 August 1965.
 From the 2nd *ríma*, verses 61-65.

Metre: *Ferskeytt hringhent*

Enginn græða **mátti** mann,
Meinin fæða trega,
Eitrið skæða **allan** hann
Ataði hræðilega.

From *Rímur af Tistrani og Indíönu*



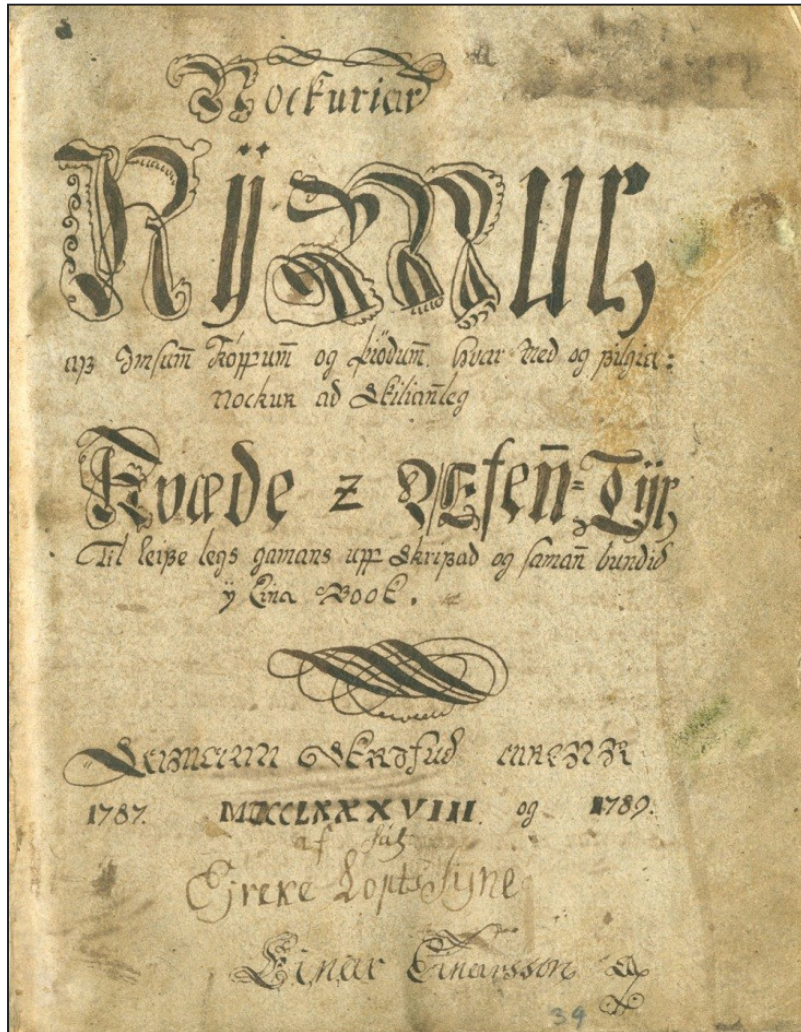
Þórunn ('Tóta') Gestsdóttir, b.
1872, Krókur í Meðallandi
(Southern Iceland). Recorded
18 October 1965.



From the 4th *ríma*, verses 49-52.
Metre: *Stikluvík*

Tistran baði **frá** nú **fer**,
Forðast *borða þrúði*,
Gékk í staðinn **hallar** **hér**,
Hilmir glaður við hann **er**.

Manuscripts



Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar, preserved in Flateyjarbók (GKS 1005 fol.), written ca. 1390.

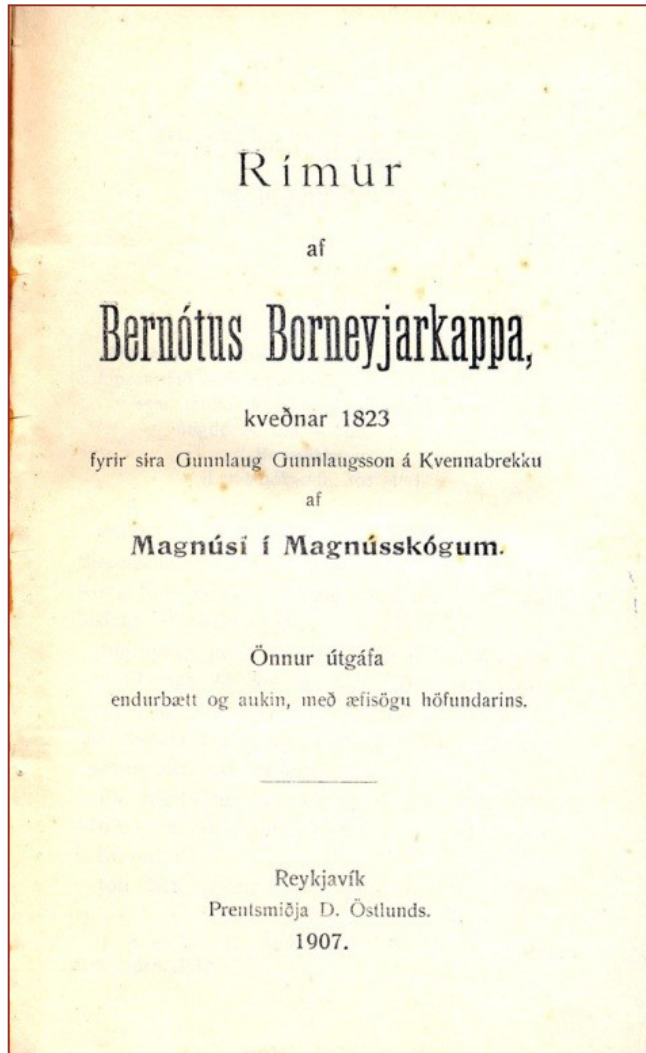
Codex Guelferbytanus 42.7 Augusteus 4to, 'Kollsbók', written in several unknown hands ca. 1480-90; contains 16 sets (originally 20).

AM 604 4to, 'Staðarhólsbók', written ca. 1550 by Tómas Arason; contains 33 sets.

AM Acc. 22, 'Kálfavíkurbók', written by Jón Þórðarson ca. 1695.

Rask 39, written 1787-89 by Eiríkur Loftsson; contains 13 sets.

Printed editions



About one quarter of the surviving *rímur* have been printed.

Guðbrandur Þorláksson's *Ein Ny Wiisna Bok* from 1612.

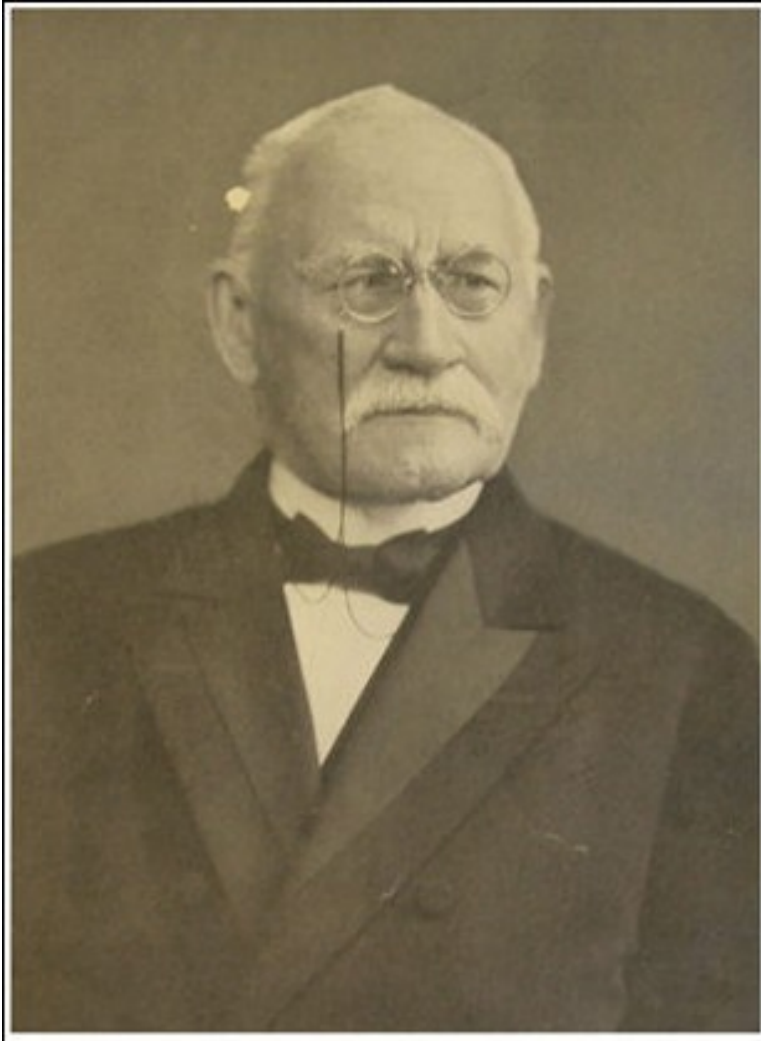
Björner's *Nordiske Kämpa Dater* from 1737.

Hrappsey, 9 sets between 1775 and 1784.

Viðey, 14 sets between 1829 and 1843.

Ca. 100 cheap popular editions from
Prentsmiðja Þjóðviljans,
Landsprentsmiðjan,
Ísafoldarprentsmiðjan,
Prentsmiðjan Gutenberg,
Prentsmiðja Davíðs Östlunds.

Finnur Jónsson (1858-1934)



Professor of Old Norse Philology at
Copenhagen University.

Fernir forníslenskir rímnaflokkar
(Kaupmannahöfn, 1896)

Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur
(København, 1904)

*Rímnasafn: Samling af de ældste
islandske rimer I-II* (København,
1905-22)

*Ordbog til de af Samfund til udg. af
gml. nord. litteratur udgivne
rímur samt til de af Dr. O.
Jiriczek udgivne Bósarímur*
(København, 1926-28)

Björn Karel Þórólfsson (1892-1973)



Archivist, philologist.

Rímur fyrir 1600, Safn Fræðafjelagsins um Ísland og Íslendinga IX (Kaupmannahöfn, 1934).

Edited two volumes in Rit Rímnafélags, *Sveins rímur Múkssonar eftir Kolbein Grímsson* (Reykjavík, 1948) and *Brávallarímur eftir Árna Böðvarsson* (Reykjavík, 1965); also edited, with Finnur Sigmundsson, *Olgeirs rímur danska* eftir Guðmund Bergþórsson (Reykjavík, 1947).

Finnur Sigmundsson (1894-1982)



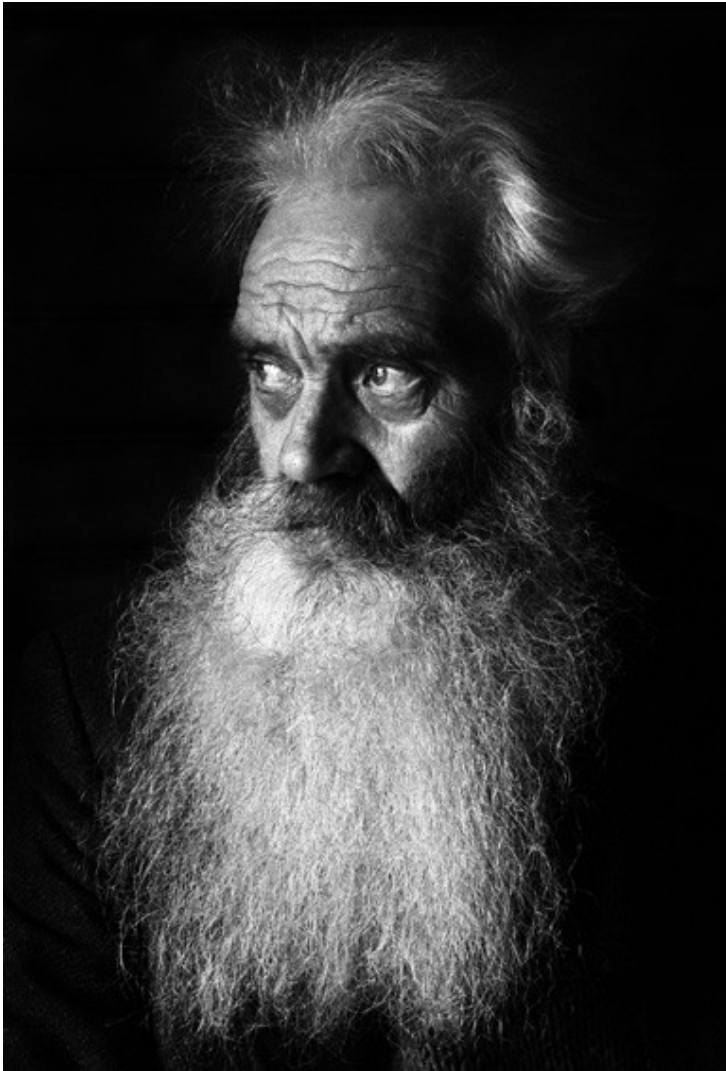
Librarian

Rímnatal I-II (Reykjavík, 1966)

Edited four volumes of Rit Rímnafélags, including Hallgrímur Pétursson's *Króka-Refs rímur* and *Rímur af Lykla-Pétri og Magelónu* (Reykjavík 1956), and, with Björn Karel Þórólfsson, *Olgeirs rímur danska eftir Guðmund Bergþórsson* (Reykjavík, 1947)

Ritsafn Hjálmars Jónssonar frá Bólu I-VI (Reykjavík, 1949-60)

Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson (1924-1993)



Allsherjargoði, skáld, kvæðamaður

Gömlu lögin: Nokkrir rímnaflokkar
(Reykjavík, 1945).

Bragfræði og háttatal (Reykjavík,
1953, 2nd ed. Akranes, 1985,
available on-line:
<http://rimur.is/>).

Edited *Sigurður Breiðfjörð*,
Rímnasafn I-VI (Reykjavík,
1961-73) and *Rímnasafnið:
Sýnisbók rímna frá 14. öld til
nú tímans* (Reykjavík, 1966).

Universal appeal

Rímur have had universal appeal in Iceland, and have been both produced and consumed by people at every level of society.

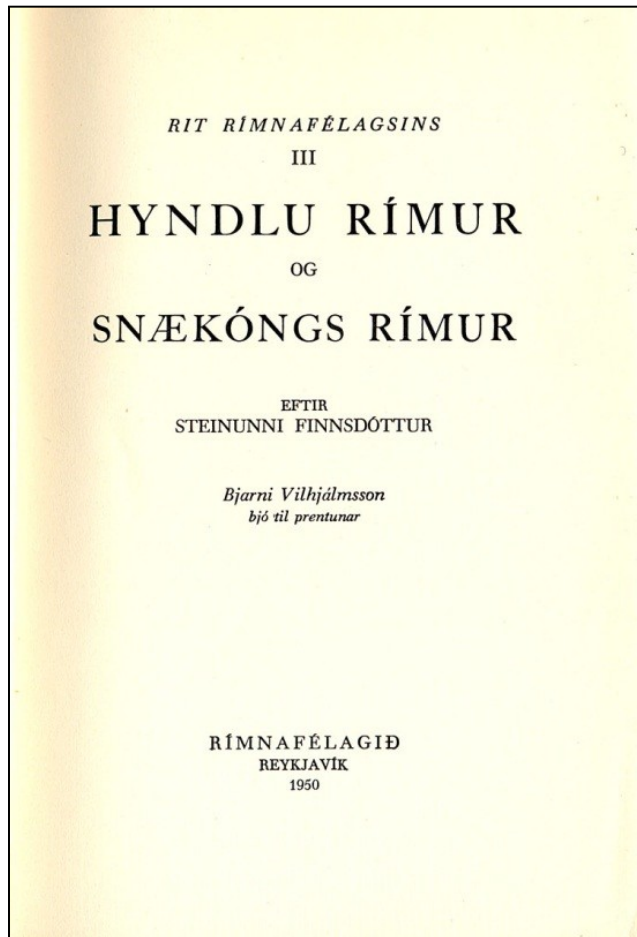
Members of the ruling elite, such as *lögmaður* Sveinn Sölvason (1722-1782), who composed a set of *Rímur af Gissuri jarli Þorvaldssyni* which were printed at Leirárgarðar in 1800.

Prominent members of the clergy also composed *rímur* – 60 of the 480 people named in *Rímnatal* had received clerical education – including sr. Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674), author of the *Passíusálmur*.

A number of other 'serious' poets also composed *rímur*, such as Benedikt Gröndal (1826-1907), who produced a set of *Rímur af Göngu-Hrólf*, comprising 48 fits, which were printed in 1893, and Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) included *Ólafs ríma Grænlandings* in his book *Hrannir* from 1913, 150 stanzas in the difficult metre *sléttubönd*. Mention could be made too of Þórarinn Eldjárn's *Disneyrímur* from 1978, on the life and times of Walt Disney, the best-selling post-war book of poetry in Iceland.



Rímur by women



Although the *rímnaskáld* were mostly men, a number of women also had a go at it. Finnur Sigmundsson lists 16 in *Rímnatal*, although in some cases these are women to whom *rímur* have been attributed which do not appear to have survived.

The first woman who is known to have composed *rímur* is Steinunn Finnsdóttir (c. 1641-c. 1710). There are two sets, *Hyndlurímur* and *Rímur af Snæ kóngi*, both based on folktales rather than prose sagas. A set of *Rímur af Flóresi kóngi og sonum hans* has been attributed to her but may not have survived.

The big three

Guðmundur Bergþórsson (1657-1705), born in poverty and a cripple from the age of 4, he was among the most prolific – and accomplished – poets of his age, composing 16 sets of *rímur*, including *Rímur af Olgeiri danska*, which are, at 60 fits, the longest *rímur* extant.

Hjálmar Jónsson frá Bólu (1796-1875), the illegitimate son of a young servant, his poetic talents revealed themselves at an early age, but he chiefly used them to compose lampoons. He composed six sets of *rímur*, including *Rímur af Göngu-Hrólfí*, which are preserved in four MSS and were printed in 1884 (and again with his collected works in 1949).

Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798–1846), probably the greatest *rímur*-poet of all time, arguably the greatest poet. 26 sets of *rímur* have survived by him, many of them printed during his lifetime. Foremost among them are *Númarímur*, widely regarded as the best *rímur* ever composed, which are based on the novel *Numa Pompilius* by J P C Florian (1755-1794).



From *Rímur af Núma kóngi Pompilssyni*

From the *mansöngur* to the 3rd *ríma* (*langhent* – *óbreytt*, *frumbakhent*, *hringhent*). Kvæðamaður: Kjartan Ólafsson (1880-1962).

Móðurjörð hvar maður fæðist
mun hún eigi flestum kær
þar sem ljósið lífi glæðist
og lítil sköpun þroska nær?

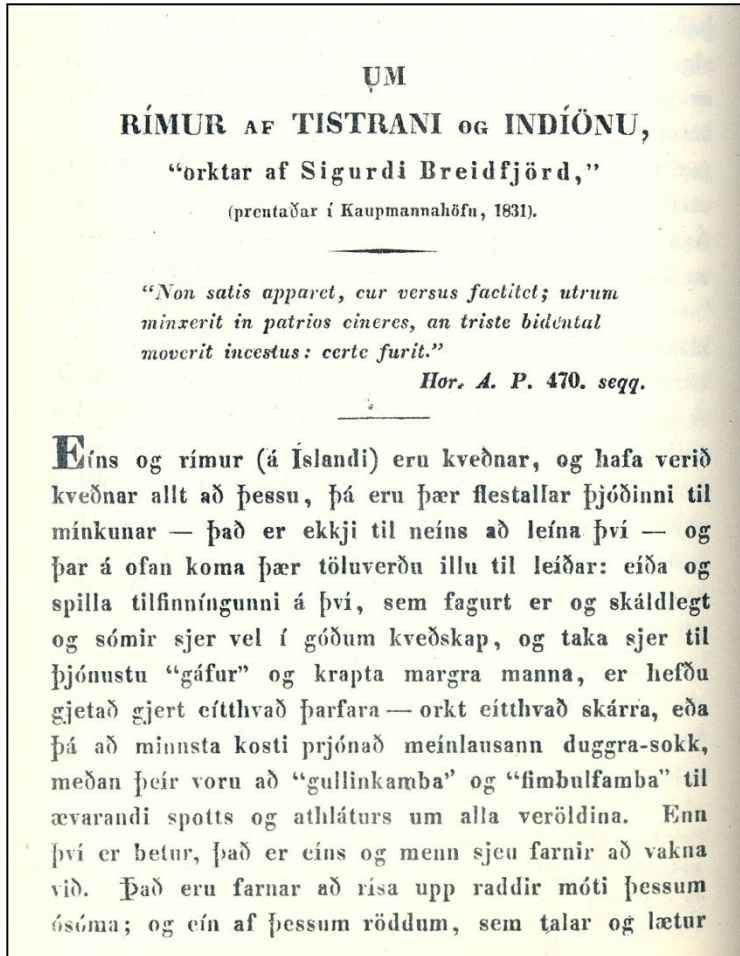
Í fleiri lönd þó fengi drengir
forlaganna vaðið sjó
hugurinn þangað þrengist lengi
er þeirra fögur æskan bjó.

Mundi ég eigi minnast hinna
móðurjarðar tinda há
og kærri heim til kynna minna
komast hugarflugi á?

Um þína prýði að þenkja og tala
það er tíðast gleðin mín
í högum fríðu hlýrra dala
hjörð um skríður brjóstin þín.



Jónas Hallgrímsson og *Fjölnir*



Breiðfjörð's *Rímur af Tistrani og Indíönu* were the subject of an extremely hostile review by Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845) in the journal *Fjölnir* (1837).

Rímur, even the best of them, Jónas wrote, are simply bad poetry, ‘þjóðinni til mínkunar’; they ‘eiða og spilla tilfinningunni á því sem fagurt er og skáldlegt og sómir sjer vel í góðum kveðskap’.

With his review, Jónas is commonly credited with having ‘dealt the whole genre such a staggering blow that it never really recovered from it’, but this is rather overstated.

So why should we care (more than we do) about *rímur*?

Because they're there – and there's a lot of them.

Because they're an integral part of the literary landscape.

Because of their role in the history of transmission.

Because they preserve – and build upon – the skaldic tradition.

Because *rímur* metres are extremely rich and complex.

Because the melodies to which the *rímur* are sung or chanted are of great antiquity, and some quite beautiful.

Because they are very interesting linguistically.

Because they can often be very funny, and occasionally quite lyrical – *rímur* are not universally bad poetry.

Because there's nothing else quite like them anywhere else in the world.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1K30XXtglk&noredirect=1>

