

Monstrosity, health and morality in medieval Scandinavia

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What is a *þurs*? (1)

The Icelandic rune-poem stanza 3 (earliest MS. c. 1500)

þ er kvenna kvöl ok kletta íbúi
ok Valrúnar verr

þ[urs] is women's torment and crags' inhabitant,
and Valrún's mate

***Skírnismál* stanzas 30–31 (Poetic Edda, earliest MS. c. 1270s; trans. Larrington)**

Tramar gneypa
þik skulu gerstan dag
jötna görðum í;
til **hrímpursa** hallar
þú skalt hverjan dag
kranga kostalaus,
kranga kostavön;
grát at gamni
skaltu í gögn hafa
ok leiða með tárurum trega.

'Fiends will oppress you
all the long weary day,
in the courts of the giants;
to the halls of the frostgiants
every day you shall
creep without choice,
without hope of choice;
weeping in exchange
for joy you shall have,
and suffer grief with tears.

Með **þursi** þríhöfðuðum
þú skalt æ nara,
eða verlaus vera;
þitt geð grípi,
þik morn morni;
ver þú sem þistill,
sá er var þrunginn
í önn ofanverða.

'With a threeheaded giant
you shall miserably linger out your life,
or else be without a man!
May your mind be seized!
May pining waste you away!
Be like the thistle,
that which is crushed
at the end of the harvest!'

What is a *purs*? (2)

Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn by William A. Craigie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957):

‘a giant, with a notion of surliness and stupidity’

Jan De Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: Brill, 1961): **‘riese, unhold’** (‘giant, fiend/monster’)

Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis/Ordbog over det Norsk-Islandske Skjaldesprog*, 2nd edn by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Møller, 1931): **‘turs, jætte’** (‘*purs*, giant/jötunn’)



The wider semantics of *þurs* (1): *þursar* and other monsters

þyrs in Old English glosses (*inter alia*) *Orcus* (god of the underworld), *marsus* ‘snake-charmer’, *cyclops*.

In *Skírnismál* Hrímgrímnir is a *þurs*, in *Snorra Edda a jötunn*.

In *Beowulf*, Grendel gets called *þyrs* but also *eoten* and much else besides.

jötunn

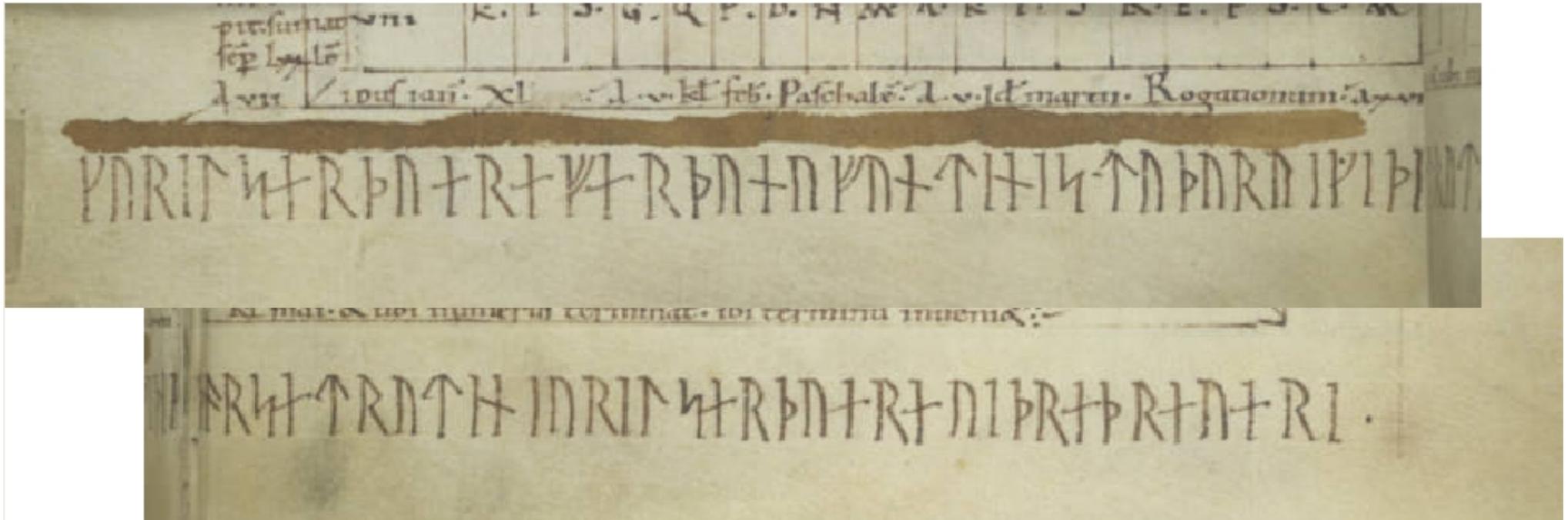
Snorri Sturluson, *Haraldar saga Hárfagra*: ch. 26 is ‘frá Svása jötni’, but Svási ‘kvað sig vera þann Finninn er konungr hafði játat at setja gamma sinn’.

þurs

dvergr

The wider semantics of *purs* (2): *pursar* and illness

The Canterbury rune-charm (MS Cotton Caligula A.xv, in a portion dated to c.1073×76; trans. Frankis)



cf. Sigtuna amulet (probably C10):

transcription:

pur sarriþu þursa trutin fliu þu nu funtin is[tu]...

translation into English:

Purs/Þórr of wound-fever, lord of *pursar*, flee now; you have been found...

Dvergar and illness

Ribe Skull fragment, C8

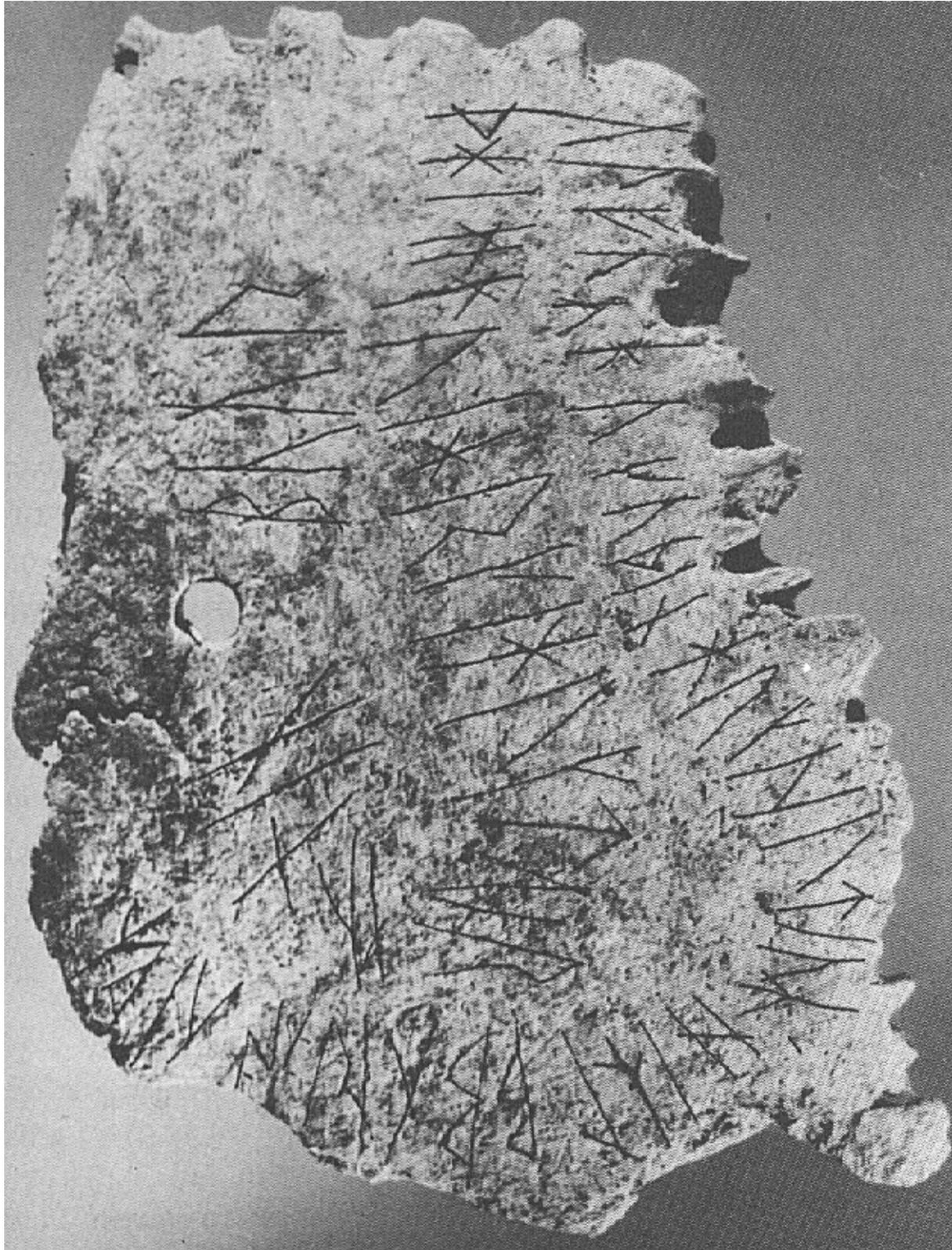
ulfuraukupinaukhutiur · hialbburiisuiþr
þaimaiarkiauktuirkunin [hole] buur

Ulfr auk Óðinn auk Hó-tiur . Hjalp bur
es viðr þæima værki. Auk dverg
unninn. Bóurr.

(?) Ulfr/Wolf and Óðinn and high-*tiur*.
bur is help against this pain. And the
dvergr (is) overcome, Bóurr.

Old English, *Peri didaxeon*

Remedy for asthmatic includes: ‘hwile
he ripað swilce he on dweorge sy’
(‘sometimes he shakes/writhes as
though he was *on dweorge*’) for
‘interdum et febriunt’ (‘sometimes they
also suffer fever’).



Þórr: fighting monsters and fighting illness (1)

Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, book 4 (*Descriptio insularum aquilonis*), chs 26–27, written c. 1075 (trans. Tschan).

Nobilissimum illa gens templum habet, quod Ubsola dicitur, non longe positum ab **Sictona** civitate. In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio; hinc et inde locum possident Wodan et Fricco. Quorum significationes eiusmodi sunt: ‘Thor’, inquiunt, ‘praesidet in aere, qui tonitrus et fulmina, ventos ymbresque, serena et fruges gubernat ... Thor autem cum sceptro Iovem simulare videtur...

Omnibus itaque diis suis attributos habent sacerdotes, qui sacrificia populi offerant. **Si pestis et famis imminet, Thor ydolo lybatur**, si bellum, Wodani, si nuptiae celebrendae sunt, Fricconi.

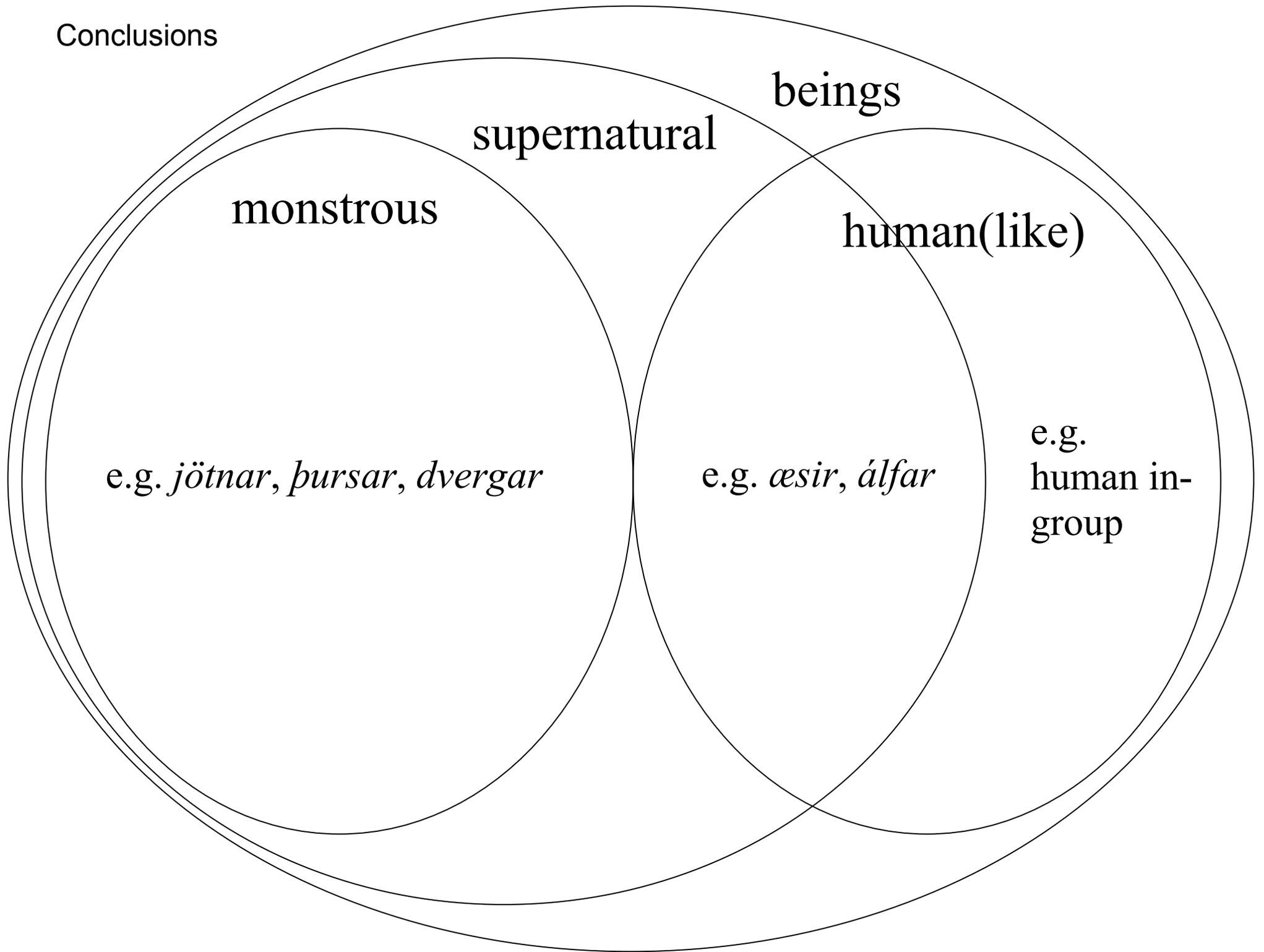
That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of **Sigtuna**. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wodan and Fricco have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops ... Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove...

For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. **If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor**; if war, to Wodan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Fricco.

Þórr: fighting monsters
and fighting illness (2)



Conclusions



beings

supernatural

monstrous

human(like)

e.g. *jötnar, þursar, dvergar*

e.g. *æsir, álfar*

e.g.
human in-
group