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# Isolated people in Sweden only stopped using runes 100 years ago

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In a remote part of Sweden they used runes until just a hundred years ago. The people in the area also speak their own language: Elfdalian.

Most people associate runes with the Viking age but in Älvdalen in western Sweden, the local population continued to use runes for centuries after the ancient written language had been abandoned by the rest of Scandinavia.

Hidden deep in the Swedish forests the runes were allowed to live on until the early 20th century, just as the inhabitants retained their very special language Elfdalian which is considered a veritable treasure chest for Scandinavian linguists.

"Älvdalen really is something very special. Firstly, because they speak an unique old Norse tongue and also because they used runes until a hundred years ago. It's absolutely fascinating," says Michael Lerche Nielsen, an assistant professor at the Department of Nordic Research at the University of Copenhagen.

## Such recent use of runes exceptional

The runic script was the dominant written language in Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia until the advent of Christianity in the ninth and tenth century introduced the Latin alphabet.

By the 15th century the Latin alphabet had almost wiped out the use of runes – but not in Älvdalen. Here, the Swedish linguist Henrik Rosenkvist recently saw a letter dated 1906 written partly in runes.

"The runes we see in Älvdalen are probably the most recent use of the script we know of. Runes otherwise died out in the Middle Ages so their use in so recent times is exceptional," says Rosenkvist who speaks and studies the unique language spoken in Älvdalen.

Nielsen agrees.

"The use of runes in Scandinavia gradually ceased during the 15th century. There are the odd areas of Gotland in Sweden and in Iceland where the rune tradition survived until the 17th century, but in Älvdalen their use was widespread until the early 20th century," he says.

## Wrote messages in runes on sticks

According to Nielsen the runes in Älvdalen were most commonly found on houses and inscribed in furniture.

In addition to this, they were also engraved into 'message blades' which were sticks of wood that were

circulated among the farms in the area.

“The people who herded the cattle up in the mountains would write messages to each other in runes,” says Nielsen.

### Isolation enabled runes to survive

The landscape surrounding Älvdalen effectively cuts the community off from the rest of Sweden by mountains, forests, and lakes.

It was precisely the area’s isolation from the rest of the country that lies behind the survival of the runes and the unique language -- while the rest of the country was flooded by the Latin alphabet, Germanic words, and modern Rikssvensk.

“Älvdalen lies extremely deep within the Swedish forests and mountains. You can get there by boat up the river, Dalälven -- a journey of more than 100 kilometres -- and getting there and back used to be quite an expedition. So people in the area weren’t particularly mobile and were able to preserve this very special culture, considered in Sweden to be extremely traditional and old fashioned,” says Nielsen.

If you ask Rosenkvist, he has more or less the same explanation as to why people in Älvdalen kept on using runes after the ancient script had been abandoned by the rest of the nation.

“People in Älvdalen are a little conservative -- in a good way. They kept themselves very much to themselves,” says Rosenkvist.

“Another important reason is that sending your children to school wasn’t obligatory in Sweden. Until the mid-19th century, many children didn’t attend school and until then, people simply kept on using the runes as their written language. When they started going to school, however, they only ever used the Latin alphabet and the use of runes gradually died out,” he says.

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 [Älvdalen lies in a thinly populated part of Sweden near Dalarna. Until the early 20th century, the people of Älvdalen still used runes. Some 2,500 people from the area still speak the unique language Elfdalian. The picture shows Österdalälven in Älvdalen. \(Photo: Fotoakuten.se\)](#) [11]

 [The runes of Älvdalen -- dalrunerne -- are reminiscent of those used on runes stones in Denmark but there are a number of differences. Dalrunerne developed over time, influenced partially by the Latin alphabet. Here are the runes as they looked in the period leading up to the 20th century. \(Illustration: Tasnu Arakun/Wikimedia Commons\)](#) [12]

 [Dalrunerne are most commonly engraved into houses, furniture, and sticks of wood. These dalruner dating from 1635 are at Orsblecksloftet in Zorns Gammelgård in the town of Mora. \(Photo: Skvatram/Wikimedia Commons\).](#) [13]

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