

WIRRALH SKIP FELAGR



Viking & Anglo Saxon Living History

Thingwall - Our local Viking Parliament.

There is a strange irony in the fact that the Vikings, a people noted for their violent blood-feuds and who are stereotypically portrayed as raping and pillaging their way across Europe, were also responsible for introducing to England one of the earliest forms of democratic government in the form of the “þing” or “thing”. The idea of democratic government seems to have been well rooted in Scandinavian society many centuries before they began raiding as Vikings, where even Scandinavian kings were largely accountable to the thing. In England we had to go through such momentous acts as Magna Carta, and later the beheading of King Charles I to bring our own monarchy under the control of law.

The literal translation of the old Norse word “þing” is “assembly” and several place names in the UK include some form of corrupted derivation of this term. Perhaps the most famous being on the isle of man where their parliament is to this day still named Tynwald after the meeting place of the thing. Thingwall on the Wirral is believed to be the site of our own Viking age regional parliament derived from the name “þing-vollr” or “assembly field” and is possibly one of the earliest things established in the UK. Located roughly in the middle of the small Norse controlled territory at the end of the Wirral it would most likely have been within a day’s walk for all Vikings who lived on the peninsula at the time. Though no archaeological evidence has been excavated there many suggest Crosshill is the site of this meeting place.

Without clear written documentation from the period we will never be certain of exactly how this local parliament functioned or how frequently it would be held. Nevertheless written records of foreign things suggest that in general they were usually presided over by the “lawspeaker”; an individual responsible for remembering and interpreting all laws passed by the community along with ensuring all evidence and points of view were fairly heard. They would act in the manor of a judge in a modern court enforcing decisions reached by democratic vote. The issue of who was entitled to vote is a little less clear, some say “all men”, some say “all free men” others suggest it was limited to “one representative from each household”. The old Norse term vǫpnatak translates roughly as “weapon-take” and is one many now equate with voting or showing agreement with a decision by raising your sword in the air to be counted. If this is the case then it would limit the ability to vote to a more affluent part of society as a sword was very expensive item to own, though if the term covered all weapons a count of raised spears may have represented the views of a higher percentage of society. What may be a little surprising given how in recent times the suffragette movement fought to win women the right to vote is that there seemed no such discrimination at a Viking thing where women were frequently known to have voted on important issues.

Issues formally discussed and voted on at the thing could range from minor petty matters of civil law to major criminal cases. What is also likely at a time when most of the ordinary population wouldn’t get to travel far or frequently, is that any large gathering of folk from the wider community would probably attract all sorts of outside activities. These could include markets, trade fairs, various forms of social entertainment and over-night revelries, perhaps religious services, or even the occasional opportunistic thief, all this along with all manner of others making the most of the large crowds.

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