



Law and order

... in 30 seconds



The Vikings had a strong sense of honor and they could be easily offended. Insults or crimes often ended in revenge and fighting, or in quarrels between families or individuals. These feuds could go on for many years.

Such problems might need to be sorted out at a public assembly, known as the Thing. Assemblies could settle arguments about property, marriage, and divorce. They could question witnesses about cases of murder, injury, or robbery. They could pass sentences, make new laws, or even proclaim someone king.



Each assembly covered a district or a region and was held at a particular time of the year. Assemblies were gatherings of free men only. Women and slaves could not take part in the assembly, but the interests of some women could be represented. The arrangements varied from one Viking land to another. In Iceland, people met at a place called the Assembly Plain, and gathered by the Law Rock. There, a council of chieftains was held to appoint a legal expert or "lawspeaker."


Assemblies could not carry out the sentences they passed, as there was nothing like a police force. It was up to the victims of the crime and the public to make sure that the law was enforced.

3-second sum-up

Public assemblies were held to pass laws and judge crimes.

Ancient parliaments

Viking assemblies were an early form of a parliament. Some of them still exist today. The Tynwald is a parliament on the Isle of Man, one of the British Isles that was settled by the Vikings. It has been meeting for over a thousand years. The Althing is the parliament of Iceland and has been passing laws since it was founded in 930 CE, aside from a gap in the 1800s when it was abolished, then reinstated.



Arguments and problems were figured out at a public assembly known as the Thing.

A thief might have to pay money back to his victim, as compensation.

Men would gather from all over the region.

The lawspeaker proclaimed the Viking law before the assembly.

A criminal could be exiled to a foreign land, or be declared an outlaw from society, with no rights.

Some disputes were settled by a "holmgang," which was armed combat between two people.

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