

# The Norse Roots Of Democracy

THE WORD "DEMOCRACY" Comes from a Creek term which means "government by the people." Yet while the roots of American democracy hearken back to ancient Athens and Rome, we owe our own tradition of democracy more to the Vikings. + Historically, the Norse were much more than pirates and raiders; they were also great explorers and colonizers, settling North America hundreds of years before Columbus. Norse custom and law also prevailed over parts of England from roughly the ninth century to the Norman conquest, especially in the "Danelaw," the Viking colonies located in northeast England. Even the Normans who conquered England in 1066 were descendants of the followers of the Viking chieftain Rollo, who established a colony called Normandy, or "land of the Northmen," on the Loire River in France in about 886 AD.

The framers of the Constitution were devotees of Creek and Roman history, particularly that of the Roman Republic. But even though America's founding fathers thought they were modeling democracy on the classic systems of government of Greece and Rome, the American republic is far more similar to the British system.

Like the British parliament, with its House of Lords and House of Commons, the US Congress was made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate. But ultimately, the idea of a dual parliament came from a blending of the customs of the Vikings, Nor-mans, and Anglo-Saxons. In fact, the world's first parliament was held by Scandinavian settlers in Iceland in 930 AD. Nowhere was the Norse love of freedom better expressed than in this rugged frontierland led neither by kings nor really any government at all, save for a yearly gathering called the "Althing," at which laws were made, legal cases were heard, and business was transacted.

However, the Norse influence on governance is felt in other rights that Americans hold dear, such as the right to trial by jury. In *Njal's Saga*, one of the most detailed accounts of Scandinavian life, there are several accounts of trial by jury dating from about 1000 AD, such as:

*The Althing continued... Geir the Priest called upon Gunnar to hear his oath. Then he ...led evidence that notice of the charges had been given in the presence of nine neighbors, whom he now called upon to take their places as jury*

Though an Icelandic jury functioned more like a grand jury (i.e. determining if there was a case and if complaint had been made according to the proper forms), the court only had the power to declare someone an outlaw. Thus, we see it here being used solely as a practical way to administer justice.

The Vikings introduced these customs to England through treaties such as the *Peace of Wedmore*, which was made between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian rulers in 878 AD, which stated:

*if a king's thegn (noble) be accused of manslaying, if he dare clear himself.. let him do that with 12 king's thegns. If any one accuse that man who is of less degree than the king's thegn, let him clear himself with 11 of his equals and with one king's thegn.*

Although the right to a trial by jury was first formally granted to the English by King John in 1215 in the *Magna Carta*, and later extended through the *Petition of Rights* (1628), it was the *English Bill of Rights* of 1689, which was inspired by the Norse form of government. And it was this Bill that eventually formed the basis for the first ten amendments to the American Constitution.

No matter what the origins of some of our most cherished freedoms, by going back to Greek and Roman roots, the authors of America's Constitution were merely finding justifications in ancient history for what had already been long established in English law. Ultimately, many of these traditions hearken back to beliefs and ideas brought to Britain on the fantastical dragon-ships of the Vikings.

**BY KEN MONDSCHHEIN**