HI-07 Things, moots and peasant republics: assemblies of medieval Europe

The collapse of Roman central authority in Western Europe and the historical absence of a formalized state apparatus in Northern Europe did not result in a permanent, Hobbesian war of all against all. In the vacuum of centralized coercive power, medieval populations engineered a diverse array of localized governance institutions: things, moots, and peasant republics. Operating under conditions of minimal literacy, zero industrial supply chains, and varying degrees of military threat, these assemblies functioned as the primary mechanisms for dispute resolution, resource management, and collective defense.

The historical record of these institutions provides a vast empirical dataset for analyzing how human populations self-govern without a monopoly on violence. The core questions these cases address are structural: at what demographic scales do assemblies function, what environmental or economic preconditions allow them to survive, and by what vectors do highly manipulative, dark-triad personalities—specifically narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths—capture, paralyze, or destroy them. An exhaustive survey of medieval European assemblies reveals that while decentralized governance can foster remarkable resilience and local liberty, it is acutely vulnerable to elite capture the moment economic complexity or demographic scale forces a transition from direct participation to representation.

The Icelandic Commonwealth and the Althing (930–1262)

The Icelandic Commonwealth represents one of the longest-lived experiments in decentralized governance in European history, operating for over three centuries without an executive branch, a standing army, or a centralized bureaucracy[1]. Settled in the late ninth century primarily by Norwegian expatriates fleeing the state-building efforts and taxation of King Harald Fairhair, the immigrants required a mechanism to resolve disputes over land and the inevitable blood feuds that arise in stateless pastoral societies.

Around the year 930, the Althing was established at Þingvellir. It served as the national assembly for an estimated population that grew to between 40,000 and 60,000 people. The political system was built around chieftains known as *goðar* (singular *goði*). Originally numbering thirty-six, and later expanded to forty-eight in the 960s to maintain regional balance through the quarter courts (*fjórðungsdómur*), these chieftains were not territorial lords in the feudal sense. Instead, they were "local bigmen" whose authority, the *goðorð*, was a unique legal fiction: it was a form of property that could be bought, sold, shared, or inherited[1].

The core legislative and judicial body at the Althing was the *Lögrétta* (Law Council). It was composed of the forty-eight *goðar*, each accompanied by two freemen advisors, plus the Lawspeaker and, after Christianization, two bishops. This created a deliberative body of 144 voting and advising members[1]. The Althing met annually for two weeks in the summer,

functioning as a "hothouse of information" and a clearinghouse for national jurisprudence where marriages were arranged, alliances were forged, and outlaws were declared[1].

Triangulating the Icelandic model requires separating its mythos from its mechanical reality. The medieval Icelanders themselves, particularly the scribes who compiled the thirteenth-century law code *Grágás* (Grey Goose Laws), framed their system as a robust, exhaustively detailed legal framework governing a republic of free, independent, and equal farmers[4]. *Grágás* presents a society obsessed with legal procedure, where even the most minor infractions were governed by exacting standards and complex witness requirements. However, the historical record, as documented in the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders) and *Sturlunga saga*, reveals a highly violent society where legal rulings were entirely dependent on private enforcement[6]. Because there was no state police or executive apparatus, a plaintiff who won a favorable verdict at the Althing still had to muster a posse of armed men to enforce the judgment, which usually resulted in outlawry or the exaction of blood money. Modern scholarship, led by legal historians and anthropologists such as Jesse Byock (2001) and William Ian Miller (1990), infers that the system was a sophisticated, self-regulating mechanism for managing feud[1]. Miller calculates that the constant threat of violence functioned as a "balance of terror," incentivizing compromise and compensation over endless bloodshed. Conversely, scholars like Bruce McGlynn argue that the monolithic *Grágás* manuscripts, compiled mostly in the 1250s as the Commonwealth was collapsing, were partly a literary fiction—an idealized constitutional blueprint written by aristocrats to assert a unique Icelandic identity against an increasingly aggressive Norwegian monarchy[4].

The capture test for the Icelandic Althing reveals a fatal flaw in the commodification of political power. The *goðorð* was a tradable commodity rather than a geographic democratic mandate. A Machiavellian actor could legally purchase multiple chieftaincies, accumulating voting blocks in the *Lögrétta* and monopolizing regional courts. Furthermore, freemen (*þingmenn*) could freely choose their *goði*, meaning a highly charismatic or ruthless leader with dark-triad traits could attract a massive following by promising aggressive protection and a share of extorted wealth[1]. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the open market of allegiance collapsed. A few families began monopolizing the *goðorð*, creating insurmountable barriers to entry. During the Age of the Sturlungs (c. 1220–1262), the system degraded into an oligarchy controlled by five or six powerful families, most notably the Sturlungar clan led by figures like Sighvatr Sturluson and his kin[8]. These families engaged in massive pitched battles involving up to a thousand men. The capture was complete when the warring chieftains, exhausted by zero-sum conflict and facing extreme economic depletion, submitted to the Norwegian King Haakon IV in 1262–1264 via the Old Covenant (*Gamli sáttmáli*). For its first two centuries, capture was resisted strictly by the open market of allegiance and relative wealth equality; if a *goði* became tyrannical, his *þingmenn* simply transferred their allegiance to a competitor[1]. Once the wealth gap widened, this mechanism failed.

Rung	Scale (Population)	Efficacy	Rationale

Household	4–10	Highly Effective	The *bær* (farmstead) was the foundational unit of autarkic survival and absolute legal liability in blood feuds.
Hamlet/Band	30–50	Effective	Extended kin networks provided the baseline militia for feud enforcement and resource pooling.
Village	150–500	Effective	Local spring assemblies (*várþing*) efficiently settled localized property and grazing disputes.
Parish/District	1,500–5,000	Effective	Quarter courts (*fjórðungsdómur*) functioned well for mid-level dispute resolution without requiring cross-country travel.
Town/Watershed	15,000–50,000	Borderline	The Althing successfully governed the island (~50,000 pop.) for 300 years, but its reliance on private enforcement failed when elite wealth concentrated.

Region	0.5M–5M	Failed	Could not scale to resist the centralized taxation, diplomacy, and military logistics of the Norwegian state.
Nation/Planet	> 50M	Never Tried	Incompatible with mass societies requiring impersonal bureaucracy and a monopoly on violence.

The Scandinavian Things: Gulating and Frostating

The assembly model of the Viking Age extended throughout the Norse diaspora, establishing the legal frameworks for massive geographic territories in mainland Scandinavia. In Norway, regional assemblies like the Gulating and the Frostating were the primary vectors of justice and political legitimation. The Gulating, established around the year 930 under King Håkon the Good, originally functioned as an *allting*—a direct democratic assembly where every free man had the right and the legal duty to attend[9]. However, as the jurisdiction expanded to cover the sprawling western regions of Hordaland, Sogn, and Fjordane, the logistical burden of mass participation over mountainous and fjord-riven terrain became untenable. Consequently, the Gulating transitioned into a *lagting* (a representative territorial court). Historical records indicate that it initially required the attendance of 375 *nevndemenn* (appointed county representatives), a number that was later reduced to 246 to streamline operations and reduce the immense cost of provisioning the delegates[11].

Triangulating the mainland Scandinavian model highlights the tension between royal ambition and peasant autonomy. According to royal sagas compiled by Snorri Sturluson, such as *Heimskringla*, the system was a top-down benevolent enterprise, routinely framing kings like Håkon the Good or Olaf the Holy as the divine "givers" of the law[10]. However, the historical record, preserved in the *Gulathingslov* and *Frostathingslov*, explicitly describes a negotiated, contractual reality. Kings had to travel to the Things to seek approval for their ascension, taxation, and military levies (*leiðangr*). The law stipulated exact fines and compensation structures for free farmers, maintaining a strict, legally codified social hierarchy differentiating between barons, free farmers, and *þræll* (slaves)[12]. Modern scholarship views the mainland Things not as pure democratic assemblies, but as early mechanisms of state-formation. Unlike Iceland, Norway had a sovereign king. The Thing became a vector through which ambitious

monarchs could standardize legal codes across disparate valleys, using the Lawspeaker to integrate royal decrees into the fabric of local custom.

The capture test for the Norwegian Things demonstrates the mechanics of monarchical co-optation. A Machiavellian monarch does not destroy an embedded cultural assembly; he standardizes it, limits its purview, and assumes the power to appoint its key members. Over centuries, the Norwegian Crown gradually restricted who could select the *nevndemenn* (representatives). Eventually, only men with a direct royal mandate—*lendmenn* (barons) and *syslemenn* (royal bailiffs)—were allowed to choose the delegates[11]. This transformed the assembly from an independent legislature into a rubber stamp for the crown. By 1274, King Magnus Lawmender bypassed the localized legislative function of the Things entirely by issuing the first national law code (*Landslov*) for all of Norway. The assemblies were permanently transformed from sovereign bodies into regional appellate courts administering the King's centralized law. The sheer geographic friction of medieval Norway—its fjords, mountains, and harsh winters—severely delayed this capture, requiring kings to negotiate in person for centuries before logistical technology and literacy allowed for a centralized bureaucratic state.

Rung	**Scale (Population)**	**Efficacy**	**Rationale**
Household	4–10	Effective	The patriarchal farmstead managed domestic production, largely reliant on unfree labor (*þræll*).
Hamlet/Band	30–50	Effective	Kin groups managed local resources and basic defense against coastal raiding.
Village	150–500	Highly Effective	Local *tings* resolved immediate property, theft, and violence disputes utilizing intimate community knowledge.
Parish/District	1,500–5,000	Effective	Sub-regional assemblies managed larger infrastructural

			issues like bridge building and local ship levies.
Town/Watershed	15,000–50,000	Borderline	The Gulating effectively synthesized laws for western Norway but required shifting from direct to representative attendance (375 delegates), inviting elite capture.
Region	0.5M–5M	Failed	As populations and military requirements grew, the Thing was successfully absorbed by the royal administrative state and stripped of its legislative power.
Nation/Planet	> 50M	Never Tried	Inherently incompatible with globalized scale without modern telecommunications .

The Tynwald of the Isle of Man

Operating on a parallel evolutionary track to the mainland Things, the Tynwald (*Þingvöllr*, assembly field) on the Isle of Man originated in the late eighth or early ninth century and represents the oldest continuous parliamentary body in the world, operating for over a millennium[14]. Established during the Norse settlement of the island, it formalized a system of governance that survived centuries of geopolitical upheaval, including the establishment of the

Norse Kingdom of Mann and the Isles by Godred Crovan in 1079, integration into Scotland in 1266, and eventual absorption into the English Crown[16].

Triangulating the Tynwald reveals a highly adaptive institution. The participants historically viewed it as the ultimate expression of their ancient Norse-Gaelic liberties, a sacred gathering held annually on Midsummer (now July 5th) at Tynwald Hill, an artificial earthen mound structurally designed to reflect a cosmological and social hierarchy[17]. The historical record shows that the Tynwald was a highly functional, mixed constitution. It evolved to include the House of Keys (originally 24 representatives drawn from the island's parishes), the legislative council, and the presiding monarch or their representative. Because few people could read, the laws were recited aloud annually by the Deemsters (law speakers) to ensure public comprehension and consent[19]. Modern scholarship infers that the Tynwald survived precisely because it was geographically isolated enough to avoid immediate destruction by mainland armies, yet strategically valuable enough that successive overlords (Scottish and English) found it cheaper to co-opt the existing local assembly rather than impose a costly foreign bureaucracy.

The capture test for the Tynwald shows a pattern of aristocratic management rather than outright destruction. A Machiavellian external power (the English Crown) captured the island's sovereignty but maintained the Tynwald as a pacification tool. The Lord of Mann (frequently the English monarch or a designated aristocrat, like the Stanley family) retained ultimate veto power over the legislation passed by the Keys. The House of Keys itself became a self-electing oligarchy for much of its history, where elite families passed seats to their heirs, entirely insulating the assembly from popular democratic pressure until democratic reforms were forced in the nineteenth century. It resisted total dissolution because the island's small population (historically a few thousand, reaching roughly 85,000 today) made the localized, highly visible Tynwald ceremony a highly effective psychological tool for manufacturing consent[16].

Rung	Scale (Population)	Efficacy	Rationale
Household	4–10	Effective	Crofting households provided the basic economic unit of the island.
Hamlet/Band	30–50	Effective	Small fishing and farming communities managed local resources.
Village	150–500	Effective	Parish-level organization formed the basis for electing or

			appointing the 24 Keys.
Parish/District	1,500–5,000	Highly Effective	The Tynwald scale successfully governed an insular population by relying on 24 representatives, maintaining tight feedback loops.
Town/Watershed	15,000–50,000	Effective	The assembly easily scaled to manage the island as the population grew, though it transitioned into an oligarchy before modern democratization.
Region	0.5M–5M	Failed	Could not project power beyond its shores; was absorbed as a Crown Dependency by the British Empire.
Nation/Planet	> 50M	Never Tried	Geographic constraints limit the model to an island ecosystem.

The Frisian Upstalsboom League (12th–14th Century)

Along the North Sea coast, encompassing modern-day Netherlands and northwestern Germany, the Frisian communities maintained a system of decentralized governance known broadly as "Frisian Freedom" (*Friese Vrijheid*). In the absence of a feudal nobility or centralized manorial

system, the autonomous rural communes organized themselves to manage the complex hydrological engineering required to survive in the coastal marshlands. The apex of this system was the Upstalsboom League, an inter-regional assembly that met annually at Pentecost near Aurich to coordinate defense, mediate disputes between the seven Frisian "sealands," and standardize laws.

Triangulating the Frisian model exposes a vast gulf between its ideological claims and its operational reality. The Frisians claimed their freedom was a divine and historical right, citing forged documents alleging that Charlemagne himself had granted them eternal liberty and exemption from feudal obligations in exchange for their military service against the Vikings. The historical record, however, shows a society perpetually torn apart by blood feuds and factional violence. The assemblies were frequently convened simply to negotiate temporary truces (*zoenen*) between warring kin groups. Modern scholarship views the Upstalsboom League not as an idyllic proto-democracy, but as a desperate, ultimately failed defense mechanism against the encroaching territorial ambitions of the Counts of Holland and the Bishops of Utrecht. The localized management of water boards (*waterschappen*) was highly successful, but the political superstructure was deeply unstable.

The capture test for the Frisian assemblies centers on the rise of the *hoofdelingen* (chieftains). A dark-triad actor in this environment exploited the wealth generated from large-scale land reclamation and trade. As certain farmers grew wealthier, they built stone fortified houses (*stinzen*), hired private mercenary retinues, and began to dominate the local legal proceedings by terrorizing the *Asega* (the traditional law speakers). The system was captured internally as these *hoofdelingen* tore the region apart in the devastating factional wars between the Schieringers and the Vetkopers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The constant civil war created a security vacuum, allowing the Dukes of Burgundy and later the Habsburgs to step in and absorb Frisia, extinguishing its autonomy. The primary resistance feature was the harsh marshland geography, which deterred heavy cavalry, but once internal cohesion broke down, geography alone could not save them.

Rung	Scale (Population)	Efficacy	Rationale
Household	4–10	Highly Effective	The *terp* (mound) dwelling household was highly adapted to the tidal environment.
Hamlet/Band	30–50	Highly Effective	Kin networks were essential for the brutal manual labor of initial dike construction.

Village	150–500	Highly Effective	The local *waterschap* (water board) effectively managed localized flood defenses and drainage without state intervention.
Parish/District	1,500–5,000	Borderline	District assemblies functioned, but were highly susceptible to dominance by wealthy *hoofdelingen* (chieftains) who built private fortresses.
Town/Watershed	15,000–50,000	Failed	The Upstalsboom League attempted to unify the 7 sealands but routinely collapsed into the Schieringer and Vetkoper factional civil wars.
Region	0.5M–5M	Failed	The fractured nature of Frisian society made it easy prey for the organized, centralized armies of Burgundy and Habsburg Spain.
Nation/Planet	> 50M	Never Tried	Inherently localized to specific coastal hydro-geography.

The Peasant Republic of Dithmarschen (1227–1559)

Dithmarschen, located in the marshlands of modern-day Schleswig-Holstein, was a *de facto* independent peasant republic within the Holy Roman Empire. Defended by a formidable geography of swamps, dikes, and the North Sea, the Dithmarschers operated an autarkic, kin-based society that successfully repelled feudal domination for over three centuries[21].

Technically subjects of the Prince-Archbishopric of Bremen, the Dithmarschers entirely ignored their overlords. Because the land was too impoverished and difficult to traverse to support a traditional feudal cavalry, no native nobility ever successfully emerged[22]. Governance was historically rooted in the *Kirchenspiele* (parish/church districts), which operated autonomously until internal coordination was required for defense and water management[23].

In 1447, to unify their legal system, prevent factional fracturing, and standardize the Dithmarscher Landrecht, the republic established the *Achtundvierziger* (The Forty-Eighth). This body consisted of 48 lifetime judges, drawn evenly (12 each) from the four primary regional subdivisions (*Döfften*). The *Achtundvierziger* quickly evolved from a central appellate court into the executive, judicial, and legislative governing body of the Republic[23].

Triangulating the Dithmarschen model reveals a fierce, insular culture. The Dithmarschers viewed themselves as divinely favored freemen protecting ancient Saxon liberties from tyrannical foreign princes. They were deeply religious, eventually turning the Catholic Church into a Lutheran state church under the Council of the 48 in 1533[21]. The historical record, however, shows that Dithmarschen was highly militarized and often predatory. They functioned occasionally as state-sponsored pirates, looting Hanseatic League ships that ran aground on their coasts and fiercely defending their own members even when they were clearly guilty of regional crimes, making them a pariah state to their neighbors[22]. Modern scholarship, notably historian William L. Urban (1991), infers that Dithmarschen's success was not born of high-minded egalitarian ideals, but of geographic luck, poverty, and a highly restrictive clan system. The clan structure provided the severe social cohesion necessary to build complex dike systems and raise a ruthless infantry militia capable of drowning invaders[26].

The capture test for Dithmarschen illustrates the dangers of oligarchic stagnation via lifetime appointments. A dark-triad actor within the *Achtundvierziger* would exploit his lifetime tenure to consolidate power, dispense patronage, and ensure his kin inherited his position. Historically, the Republic was largely captured internally by dominant clans. For example, the Wollersen clan, the largest and wealthiest in the region, managed to hold five of the 48 seats simultaneously, effectively creating an entrenched oligarchy[24]. However, the system resisted capture by a *single* autocrat because the rival clans would fiercely unite against any one family attempting to crown itself. The ultimate failure of the republic came from outside force. While Dithmarschen’s resistance to external capture was legendary—culminating in the Battle of Hemmingstedt (1500) where they opened the dikes and slaughtered the heavily armored mercenary Black Guard in the freezing mud—the republic was finally crushed in the "Final Feud" of 1559. The combined, well-funded mercenary armies of Denmark and Holstein overwhelmed the peasant militia, ending their 332-year run of independence[21].

Rung	Scale (Population)	Efficacy	Rationale
Household	4–10	Highly Effective	Subsistence farming households formed the resilient base of the marsh economy.
Hamlet/Band	30–50	Highly Effective	Deep, rigid clan structures (*Schlüter*) strictly organized agricultural labor and militia mustering.
Village	150–500	Highly Effective	The *Kirchenspiele* (parishes) functioned as highly cohesive, self-governing modules centered around the church.
Parish/District	1,500–5,000	Effective	Regional *Döfften* effectively managed localized law and sent delegates to the central council.
Town/Watershed	15,000–50,000	Effective	The *Achtundvierziger* successfully governed a regional population of roughly 40,000 for a century, coordinating dike maintenance and total war.

Region	0.5M–5M	Failed	The autarkic peasant economy could not generate the capital necessary to sustain long-term warfare against consolidated, industrialized nation-states in 1559.
Nation/Planet	> 50M	Never Tried	Structurally limited to an agrarian, marsh-based clan society.

The Swiss Landsgemeinde and the Confederacy (1291–1481)

The Alpine valleys of central Switzerland provide the most successful enduring model of medieval bottom-up governance. The foundational myth centers on the Federal Charter (*Bundesbrief*) of early August 1291, where the valley communities of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden swore a mutual defense pact to protect their localized autonomy against the encroaching Habsburg dynasty[28].

The primary governance vehicle of these early rural cantons was the *Landsgemeinde*, a sovereign, open-air assembly of all enfranchised male citizens. Voting was conducted by a show of hands, or frequently, by raised swords, visually demonstrating the lethal capability backing the franchise[28]. The *Landsgemeinde* held supreme power: it elected the *Landammann* (chief magistrate), voted on taxation, and decided on matters of war, peace, and alliances. The true test of the Confederacy's resilience occurred in 1481. Following the spectacularly successful Burgundian Wars, the rural and urban cantons nearly tore each other apart over the distribution of loot and the proposed admission of the city-states Fribourg and Solothurn to the pact. The federal Tagsatzung (Diet of Stans) was deadlocked, and civil war was imminent[30]. The assembly was saved by the intervention of Nicholas of Flüe (Brother Klaus), a former soldier and magistrate turned hermit. His secret counsel to the assembly, delivered by the priest Heimo Amgrund, resulted in the *Stanser Verkommnis* (Treaty of Stans), an ingenious compromise that expanded the confederacy while guaranteeing mutual assistance against internal peasant revolts, effectively saving the union[30].

Triangulating the Swiss model requires piercing the veil of Alpine romanticism. The Swiss

framed their assemblies as the ultimate expression of direct democracy, divine liberty, and communal purity, a narrative immortalized in the later myth of William Tell. The historical record, however, shows that the cantonal assemblies were deeply exclusionary and highly regulatory. They strictly controlled who could buy land, denying foreigners and non-citizens access to alpine pastures, which were the core economic driver of the region[29]. Decrees from the Schwyz assembly in 1294 explicitly restricted inheriting land among marital couples involving outsiders, operating essentially as an ethnic cartel[29]. Modern scholarship, notably historian Peter Blickle (1990), views the Swiss Confederacy not as an ideological democracy, but as a highly pragmatic, ruthless economic enterprise[28]. The *Landsgemeinde* was a mechanism for managing the "commons" (the fragile alpine pastures) and organizing the export of the region's most valuable commodity: highly disciplined, extraordinarily lethal mercenary infantry (the Swiss pikemen).

The capture test for the Swiss system highlights the vulnerabilities of direct democracy to patrician oligarchy. A Machiavellian family utilizes wealth generated from foreign mercenary contracts or control of the Alpine trade passes to patronize poorer citizens. By monopolizing military leadership and economic favors, these families ensured their constant election to the magistracy year after year, eventually making the *Landsgemeinde* a rubber stamp for patrician will. Over the centuries, several cantons fell heavily under the sway of powerful magistrate families who controlled the secret councils that set the agenda for the open-air votes. However, the *Landsgemeinde* resisted total authoritarian capture because the citizenry was heavily armed, possessed a high degree of military literacy, and was perfectly willing to revolt if pushed too far. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the *Stanser Verkommnis*, the decentralized nature of the Tagsatzung required consensus, preventing any single canton or autocrat from dominating the others.

Rung	Scale (Population)	Efficacy	Rationale
Household	4–10	Highly Effective	Patriarchal alpine farming units managed intense seasonal labor.
Hamlet/Band	30–50	Highly Effective	Cooperative labor required for cheese production and maintaining mountain paths.
Village	150–500	Highly Effective	Excellent for managing local alpine resources and preventing the

			tragedy of the commons.
Parish/District	1,500–5,000	Highly Effective	The *Landsgemeinde* scale perfectly matched the physical demographic limits of human voice projection in an open town square.
Town/Watershed	15,000–50,000	Effective	Functioned well but became increasingly susceptible to patrician capture as economic complexity and mercenary wealth grew.
Region	0.5M–5M	Borderline	The Tagsatzung (federal diet) coordinated mutual defense but frequently deadlocked, requiring external mediators (like Nicholas of Flüe) to prevent civil war.
Nation/Planet	> 50M	Failed	Direct open-air democracy fundamentally breaks down at this scale; modern Switzerland utilizes representative

			federalism and referendums instead.

The Captured Assemblies: Witan, Cortes, and Sejmik

Not all assemblies survived as independent vectors of peasant or freeman power. Many were structurally designed to be absorbed into monarchical structures, or were weaponized by the elite to destroy the state entirely.

The Anglo-Saxon Witan and Moots: The *Witenagemot* (meeting of wise men) was an assembly of the ruling class whose primary function was to advise the Anglo-Saxon kings and legitimize their succession. It was an aristocratic council, not a democratic body. At the local level, however, the Shire and Hundred moots functioned as highly effective decentralized courts where freemen gathered to resolve disputes and manage local affairs.

- *Triangulation & Capture:* The system was framed as ancient custom, but historically served as a mechanism of local control. Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, these institutions were swiftly and ruthlessly co-opted. A Machiavellian ruler (William the Conqueror) did not abolish the moots; he bypassed their sovereignty by imposing the Sheriff (shire-reeve), a royal appointee who transformed the local assembly from a community court into a hyper-efficient tax-extraction mechanism for the Crown. The decentralized moots were completely hollowed out by central authority.
- *Scale:* Worked at the Village/District scale (Hundred Moots); captured at the Region scale (Shire) by royal administration.

The Castilian Cortes: In 1188, King Alfonso IX convened the Cortes of León, widely cited by historians as the first parliamentary body in Europe to include *procuradores* (representatives of commoners from the cities) alongside the traditional estates of nobles and clergy[33].

- *Triangulation & Capture:* While framed retrospectively as a milestone in democratic representation, the historical reality is that this inclusion was purely extractive and transactional. The Crown was desperate for revenue to fund the Reconquista against the Moors, and the growing urban centers held the wealth. The Cortes never achieved true sovereignty; it was a transaction point where the king traded limited municipal privileges (fueros) for immediate tax revenues. A dark-triad monarch easily managed this assembly by playing the estates against each other, ensuring the *procuradores* never allied with the nobility to challenge royal supremacy.
- *Scale:* Functioned at the Region/Nation scale (0.5M - 5M) strictly as an extractive fiscal mechanism, not as a sovereign governing body.

The Polish Sejmik and Sejm: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth provides the ultimate historical case study of how structural veto points can be exploited by dark-triad actors to entirely destroy a vast nation-state. Through a series of constitutional concessions extracted from weak kings, including the *Nihil Novi* (1505) and the Henrician Articles (1573), the *szlachta* (the enfranchised nobility, comprising nearly 10% of the population) completely stripped the

monarchy of its power[34]. They vested supreme authority in the regional assemblies (*sejmiks*) and the national parliament (*Sejm*), which met for a six-week term every two years.

- *Triangulation & Capture:* The *szlachta* claimed they were operating a "Golden Liberty," a perfect republic of equals where the king was merely a contracted manager bound by the *pacta conventa*. The historical record shows this created an anarchic, ungovernable vacuum. The fatal flaw was the *Liberum Veto*, formally established as a parliamentary precedent in 1652 by Władysław Siciński[34]. This principle held that all decisions in the *Sejm* had to be strictly unanimous. The *Liberum Veto* mathematically guaranteed capture. In an assembly of thousands, if a 100% consensus is required, the cost for a hostile foreign power to paralyze the state is simply the cost of bribing the single most greedy, narcissistic, or indebted member of the assembly. Neighboring absolute monarchies (Russia, Prussia, Austria) ruthlessly exploited this. They routinely bribed minor nobles to stand up in the assembly and shout *"Nie pozwalam!"* (I do not allow), immediately dissolving the session and voiding all passed legislation. The state was functionally paralyzed, unable to raise taxes, build infrastructure, or field an army, directly resulting in the partitions of Poland and the complete erasure of the Commonwealth from the map.
- *Scale:* Failed catastrophically at the Nation scale (10M+). The insistence on localized, unanimous veto power destroyed the macro-structure.

Synthesis: Why Some Survived

A rigorous analysis of these cases reveals three non-negotiable preconditions for the survival of medieval assemblies:

1. **Impenetrable Geography:** Dithmarschen had its tidal marshes; Switzerland had its freezing alpine passes; Iceland had the vast, treacherous North Atlantic Ocean. The logistical cost for a centralized state to project force into these regions exceeded the economic value of conquering them. When technology lowered this cost (e.g., advanced mercantilist fleets, professional artillery trains, paved roads), the republics were invariably absorbed.
2. **Military Self-Reliance and Lethality:** Survival was directly correlated to the violent capacity of the assembly's constituents. The Swiss *Landsgemeinde* and the Dithmarscher *Achtundvierziger* represented populations of highly drilled, heavily armed freemen capable of neutralizing heavy cavalry. If the population was disarmed, the assembly became a rubber stamp.
3. **Absence of Extreme Wealth Concentration:** Assemblies worked when property and capital were relatively distributed. The Icelandic Althing collapsed into civil war when a handful of families monopolized the wealth. Radical equality of condition among the voting body was a prerequisite for the assembly's legitimacy; once an oligarchy formed, the institutional mechanics were used to oppress the underclass.

The Strongest Case Against: The Critics

The romance of the medieval assembly is frequently dismantled by modern institutional economists and critical historians. The strongest case against these models is articulated through two distinct lenses:

- **The Institutionalist Critique (e.g., Daron Acemoglu, James A. Robinson):** These scholars argue that assemblies like the Althing or the Upstalsboom League were not inclusive institutions, but highly extractive oligarchies in disguise. They failed to produce long-term economic growth or technological innovation because they lacked a centralized state capable of enforcing property rights across vast distances, investing in macro-infrastructure, or protecting against external shocks. Their "law" was merely formalized feud, leading to stagnation.
- **The Marxist / Sociological Critique:** Critics emphasize that these "republics" were fundamentally violent patriarchies predicated on the systemic subjugation of a vast underclass. In Scandinavia, the "free" farmers relied heavily on the brutalized labor of *þræll* (slaves) to maintain their estates while they rode off to debate at the Thing for weeks at a time[13]. The Swiss *Landsgemeinde* strictly excluded women, foreigners, and non-landowners for centuries. These assemblies were not early democracies; they were cartels of armed, male property owners colluding to manage regional monopolies and oppress internal dissent.

Avoiding the Naturalistic Fallacy

In the context of designing systems for a post-collapse environment, we must strictly avoid the naturalistic fallacy and the romance of the primitive. **Old does not mean good, and small does not mean fair.**

The fact that the Icelandic Althing functioned for three hundred years does not make it a moral triumph; it functioned by tolerating high levels of normalized violence, cold-blooded blood-price calculations, and outright slavery. The decentralized nature of Dithmarschen resulted in xenophobic isolationism, religious intolerance, and rampant piracy. Small-scale governance often generates intense social conformity, crushing individual liberty and innovation under the suffocating weight of local clan expectations and religious dogma. If we are to extract principles from these historical examples for future governance, we must surgically decouple their structural mechanics (how they handled information, vetoes, and representation) from their brutal historical sociology.

Terminal Summary

10-Line Summary of Robust Findings: Medieval assemblies functioned effectively only under strict parameters of geographic isolation, widespread weaponization of the populace, and relative wealth equality. They were universally vulnerable to elite capture the moment internal wealth concentrated, allowing Machiavellian actors to buy voting blocks, purchase judicial positions, or hire private militias. Direct democracy (open-air assemblies) hit an absolute scaling limit at roughly the district level (a few thousand people) due to the acoustic and logistical limits of human gatherings. Beyond that scale, logistics mandated representation, which naturally led to oligarchic capture (e.g., Dithmarschen's 48 regents) unless checked by fierce internal clan rivalries. Assemblies requiring 100% consensus (Poland's *Sejm*) were mathematically destined for paralysis and foreign subversion. Systems treating political power as a tradable commodity (Icelandic *goðorð*) inevitably consolidated into monopolies, triggering civil war. Successful federations (Switzerland) survived internal fracture only through carefully engineered,

decentralized compromise mechanisms and the shared economic incentive of exporting military violence.

Contested or Open Questions:

- To what extent did the massive, complex oral law codes reflect actual sociological practice versus the idealized literary aspirations of an elite class facing cultural absorption by foreign monarchs?
- Is it possible to decouple local assembly governance from the exclusionary xenophobia and rigid social conformity that historically bound such communities together?
- Can a decentralized, highly armed peasant republic transition into an economically complex, industrialized society without centralizing its military and judicial authority?

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Implementability after the Fall

Minimum Viable Version (No State, No Grid, No Internet):

- **Household (4–10 people):** Functions as the primary autarkic economic and liability unit. Needs basic agricultural/survival literacy and a clear, undisputed chain of authority for immediate physical survival and defense.
- **Village (300 people):** A direct-assembly model (a local *Thing*). Needs a designated, highly visible outdoor meeting place (a field with good natural acoustics), a shared solar/lunar calendar to guarantee synchronous attendance (e.g., meeting on the summer solstice to avoid planting/harvest conflicts), and a literate "Lawspeaker" capable of recording property boundaries, water rights, and judicial precedents in a physical ledger.
- **District (3,000 people):** A representative council (a *Lagting*). The ten constituent villages each elect three delegates. Needs a central, defensible moot hill. Voting must be conducted by visible, simultaneous signals (raised hands or weapons) to prevent ballot manipulation and secret alliances.
- **First Failure to Expect:** The "Sturlung Vector." Within three generations, one highly competent or aggressive family will accumulate outsized agricultural surplus or weapons. They will use this surplus to patronize poorer households during a famine, effectively buying their votes at the village assembly and converting the democratic process into a

factional oligarchy, destroying the system from within.

Principles

- **The Geography Principle:** Decentralized assemblies can only survive against centralized states if they possess extreme geographic friction that makes the logistical cost of external force projection prohibitively expensive.
- **The Lethality Principle:** The political sovereignty of a local assembly is directly proportional to the independent, distributed military capability of its constituent members.
- **The Veto Liability Principle:** As the threshold for assembly consensus approaches 100%, the systemic vulnerability to cheap, dark-triad manipulation or foreign bribery increases exponentially, leading to total paralysis.
- **The Representation Friction Principle:** Once a population exceeds the acoustic and logistical limits of an open-air square, the necessary shift to representative delegation inherently creates a class of professional magistrates highly prone to oligarchic capture.
- **The Property-Power Principle:** If political authority or voting weight can be legally bought, sold, or accumulated as a commodity, the system will inevitably collapse into an aristocratic monopoly and trigger civil war.

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