Pirates: Leaders in Freedom and Equality?

When most people think of pirates, they think of lawless renegades who lived a life of anarchy and utter freedom. It is true that pirates in the 17th and 18th centuries did not submit to the regimes of the day. But even though pirates were ruled by neither monarchy nor official governments, they were not without laws. Pirates followed their own rules and regulations—rules that were made aboard each pirate ship.

Some important values to pirates were liberty, equality, and fraternity—the same values that became the foundation of the French Revolution more than a hundred years later. That’s right—pirates did it first! Aboard many ships, pirates had as much say in a decision as the captain of a ship, who usually did not dominate his crew as a dictator. Captains were elected, and they could be removed from leadership at any time. Pirates voted on what their crew should do, and each pirate was given an equal share of the looted wealth to do with as he or she pleased.

It is possible that one group of pirates may have even established their own democracy of sorts—a pirate utopia called Libertalia. A pirate captain named Misson was elected to lead this domain on the island of Madagascar. Pirates there also elected representatives to speak for them in a yearly meeting to make decisions for the community. We can’t be sure if Libertalia really existed, but if it did, it died out around 1700 as piracy began to wane.

Make no mistake; pirates were brutal and violent people. But they also knew the importance of many values we hold dear today.