

King John and the Magna Carta

- The medieval period during which the power of the English king became more limited was followed by a time when the monarch gained more power once again. The nobles understandably became upset because they had been used to having some control over the monarchy. Their anger was intensified when the actions of King Richard began to cost the people a lot of money in taxes. Richard had used large sums of tax money to participate in a foreign crusade called for by the Catholic Church. During his return trip to England, Richard was kidnapped and held for ransom. As a result, the English people were forced to pay more money to free their king. After Richard's eventual death in battle, his younger brother John assumed the throne in 1199.
 - * John "Lackland" was a cruel and unpopular king. King John had inherited no land from his father and upon ascending the throne, he lacked the funds to defend England's lands in France successfully. As a result, he forced all landowners to pay him more money. John also began to buy goods cheaply and sell them to his subjects at high prices. Subjects were ordered to assist in the construction of John's palaces and to donate horses and other needed items whenever John requested them. At the same time, John offered fewer services to the people. Finally, John demanded more money in order to go to war with France. John was a weak military leader (earning the nickname "Softsword") and lost much of England's land in France. By this time, the English nobility was furious with their king. Because John had also engaged in a bitter quarrel with Pope Innocent III and tried to take control over some Church decisions, he was excommunicated by the Pope. Consequently, church officials in England also became angry with the king and supported the nobles in their opposition to the king's policies.
 - Finally, in 1215, at the meadow of Runnymede, the nobles and church officials confronted John and forced him to sign a contract listing their demands. This contract, called the Magna Carta (Great Charter), curbed the king's power and became the basis for many democratic propositions in the centuries to come. The Magna Carta contained several rules for kings: the king was not allowed to imprison freemen without a trial by jury; the king had to consult with the lords before taxing land; the king had to choose competent officials who understood and obeyed the law themselves; and the king could not interfere with or limit the freedom of the church.
 - After King John signed the charter, the conflicts continued until his death the following year. The Magna Carta lived on, and though it did not directly challenge the sovereignty of the king, it was an important step in eventually giving more power to the people and limiting the power of kings.
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Magna Carta

Historical background: In 1215, King John of England signed the Magna Carta, giving back to the barons, or leading nobles, and church officials the rights they believed they had lost during John's rule. The Magna Carta has been described as a "treaty of peace" between the king and his barons, but the document's impact was far-reaching. The principle in the Magna Carta that the ruler is subject to the law was an important step forward in the development of constitutional government in England. Later this principle was also adopted by other nations establishing their own governments.

1. We have granted that the English church shall be free, and shall hold its rights entire and its liberties uninjured.
We have granted moreover to all free men of our kingdom all the liberties written below, to be held by themselves and their heirs from us and our heirs.
2. If any of our earls or barons has died, and if his heir is of full age, he shall have his inheritance.
8. No widow shall be compelled to marry so long as she prefers to live without a husband, provided she gives security that she will not marry without our consent, or without the consent of her lord.
12. No tax shall be imposed in our kingdom except by the common council of our kingdom, except for ransoming of our body, for making our oldest son and knight, and for once marrying our oldest daughter.
13. And the city of London shall have all its ancient liberties and free customs, as well as land as by water. Moreover, we grant that all other cities and villages and ports shall have all their liberties and free customs.
14. And for holding a common council of the kingdom concerning the assessment of a tax otherwise than in the three cases mentioned above, we shall summon the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and greater barons by our letters.
20. A free man shall not be fined for a small offense, except in proportion to the measure of the offence; and for a great offense he shall be fined in proportion to the magnitude of the offense, and none of the fines shall be imposed except by the oaths of honest men of the neighborhood.
21. Earls and barons shall be fined by their peers and only in proportion to their offense.
39. No free man shall be taken or imprisoned or dispossessed, or outlawed, or banished, or in any way destroyed except by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.
40. To no one will we sell, to no one will we deny, or delay right or justice.
52. If anyone shall have been removed by us without legal judgement of his peers, from his lands, castles, or his right we will resort them to him immediately.
61. The barons shall elect twenty-five barons of the kingdoms, who ought with all their power observe the liberties which we have given to them. If we or any of our servants shall have broken any of the articles of peace, and the wrong shall have been shown to four barons of the aforesaid twenty-five barons, let those four barons come to us and ask that we correct that wrong without delay. And if we shall not have corrected the wrong within forty days, the four barons shall refer the matter to the remainder of the twenty-five barons. Let these twenty-five barons with the whole of the country seize our castles, lands, and possessions until the wrong shall have been corrected according to their judgment.